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## BLUFF BILL

THE PLOTTING MISCREANT DISCOVERED THE TWO LADS IN HIS FRONT—FUGITIVES  
LIKE HIMSELF. SATAN SEEMED TO BEFRIEND BLUFF BILL.

### OR, The Lynx of the Leona.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM,"  
(MAJOR SAM. S. HALL.)

AUTHOR OF "THE THREE TRAILERS," "THE  
DAISY FROM DENVER," ETC., ETC.

#### CHAPTER I. AN EARLY EDEN.

THE Leona river is a tributary of the Rio Frio, the last-named river, after being increased in volume by the waters of the San Miguel and other smaller streams, forming a junction with the Rio Nueces, and emptying into Corpus Christi Bay.

And a beautiful stream, indeed, is the Rio Leona, with a wide belt of towering timber on



either side, extending at some points near its confluence with the Frio fully a half-mile from each bank. The slowly moving waters are screened from the sun by the thickly intertwined branches, which stretch out on each side, protecting the element that nourished their roots from the evaporating power of the sun, and preventing the pellucid waters from becoming insipid and unfit to cool and refresh the parched throats of man and beast.

Trees, moss, and vines seem to have formed a fraternal compact to shield in a loving manner the waters of the Leona, as well as most of the smaller streams of Texas, which may appropriately be called the Italy of America.

And in no portion of the Lone Star State could a prairie-roamer find more favorable or beautiful camping-grounds, more brilliant or fragrant flowers, more game or fish, or better grazing-ground for his prized steed, than on the outer borders of the Leona timber, in the natural openings amid the shades, or at some points along the banks clear of the dense undergrowth.

Glorious summer wilds they are, with their pure air! There one may realize what life is, and how grand and free it is to live that life on the plains, with free circling lasso, trusty rifle, and bounding mustang.

Did you break from the timber of the Leona at any point where the stream was of sufficient magnitude to be termed a river, a score or less of years ago, you would, gentle reader, have beheld, as the sun arose, a sight that would render a hunter nearly insane with delight. Deer and antelope, in small herds, could be seen scattered here and there as far as the eye could reach, up and down the stream, and between those animals and the shades, numberless flocks of wild turkeys.

Nor was the air without its feathered beauties, for the whistling quail, the linnnet, the soaring lark, the Carolina dove, and the enrapturing mocking bird, besides many other species of the winged family, flew on every side; while, back in the shades, the fluttering of wings amid the dense foliage betrayed the presence of birds that preferred the bottom-timber to the bright and sunlit prairie.

A resident of Texas could tell plainly by the different varieties of vines and cacti that he was not far from the Rio Grande. He would know that he was near the impassable chaparrals of the Bravo from the dense and luxuriant growth which everywhere surrounded him.

Those who write of chaparrals, north of Red river, know very little of what a chaparral really is.

But, within the bottom-timber of the Rio Leona, as has been mentioned, are openings here and there, besides clear spaces entirely free from undergrowth, along the banks of the stream. These oases afforded beautiful camping-places, and at night, when the horses are brought in from the outer plain for security, the animals may be tethered, where, during the night, they may crop the wild rye which there grows rich and rank.

This description of the country will serve for to-day, with the exception that the mustangs and much of the game have disappeared, and ranches are more or less thickly located on both sides of the river, all danger from roving bands of Indians or Mexicans being long since passed. But, at the time of which we write, war-parties of Comanches often went within a few miles of the city of San Antonio, massacring the people who had established themselves on the Rio Medina.

The point to which we shall draw the reader's attention is some ten miles from the confluence of the Leona with the Frio, where the former stream makes a wide sweep to the northwest, curving around to the eastward. It is about a hundred miles, in a direct line, from this bend due south to Eagle Pass, on the Rio Grande, but from the latter point going north toward the Leona, for two-thirds of this distance, it is anything but a safe section for the traveler. And outside of the dangers to be apprehended from savages and lawless Greasers, there is but little grass and a poor chance to obtain water.

However, one who has passed much of his life in the extreme south and southwest, and on the western border of the Lone Star State gets accustomed to privations, the mere name of which would discourage a stranger.

The bend of the Leona river, to which allusion has been made, is quite extensive, the stream taking an abrupt turn to the northwest, as if to join its waters with those of the Frio by the nearest route; then, seeming to have abandoned this idea, and in a wide curve sweeping around and returning to a point in line with its previous

course. And that entire bend is covered with a rich carpet of luxuriant grass, mingled with buffalo clover, and bespangled with flora of every conceivable hue and fragrance.

Any one, with an eye to the future, would see in this a most eligible spot at which to locate, although quite dangerous, being exposed, not only to the marauding Comanches, Apaches, and other hostile tribes, but also to the merciless bandits of Mexico, whose raids were most disastrous to the rancheros on the Nueces, and along the Rio Grande on the American side.

Juan Cortina, the bandit king, was even now on the eve of invading Texas, with an army of the most desperate and lawless ladrones and escaped peons and ex-bandits; and he was to prove to the Texans that all past raids into their territory had been mere play—that they had been tame and insignificant in comparison with the devastation and death he would, and did, spread broadcast up and down the Rio Bravo!

And the beautiful, but dangerous, point on the border, which we have described, had been at this time pre-empted, or located—a substantial dwelling erected, and stock purchased and driven to the range within the bend, by those who will be active characters in our story.

## CHAPTER II.

### CAPTAIN LEM.

THE land within the big bend of the Leona, so nearly inclosed by the stream and its wide belt of bottom-timber, had been purchased, but a few months previous to the time referred to, by Captain Lemuel La Grange, a man who had been a resident of Texas ever since the war between the United States and Mexico. He had, in fact, participated in that struggle, and in consequence was hated by all the Mexicans who knew of it.

Previous to removing to the Leona, Captain La Grange had resided on the Nueces, but a short distance from the town of Oakville, where he had quite an extensive ranch; and, upon removing, he had driven a portion of his stock of cattle and horses to his new home.

He was commonly known and addressed as "Cap'n Lem," and was an out and out Texan in manner, dress, and language, although having a fair education. No one, however, to hear him talk, would have believed that the captain had ever seen the inside of a school-house, for he used freely and habitually the slang and clipped words of the average Texan of the time. But, even the best educated people, there and then, as a rule ignored grammar and correct pronunciation, the style of talk around them having become contagious.

Captain Lem was an old bachelor, yet for all that, and in spite of the fact that he was clearly on the western side of fifty, he was of a jovial nature, and was universally liked.

He was full six feet in height, and strongly built, very powerful, and quick in motion when there was need of activity. His hair and beard were long and gray, and his full, round face had a very pleasant expression, except when he was angry.

He always went attired in the usual Texan style; his coarse breeches, thrust into strong boots, which were never without spurs, and wearing, besides, a blue woolen shirt and wide-brimmed hat. His arms were a huge Colt's revolver and bowie-knife, the pistol being one of the first hundred manufactured by the inventor, having been made for the company of rangers commanded by the celebrated Jack Hays.

These weapons created a revolution in border war methods, and dumfounded the hostile Indians, who could not comprehend how a pistol could be fired without reloading.

Being a man of nearly two hundred pounds avoirdupois, and forced to be in the saddle much of the time, Lemuel La Grange kept some half-dozen of the strongest and hardiest half-breed horses for his own special use. As may be supposed, a man of the old ranchero's disposition would not care to live alone; but he had only one companion in his home.

This was his nephew, a youth of fifteen, the son of a brother who had fallen a victim to yellow fever at Corpus Christi. The boy's mother had also died of that Southern scourge soon after, leaving him, at ten years of age, an orphan.

However, the lad had made his way to his uncle Lem, when the latter had resided near Oakville, and had been welcomed by him, and treated with every kindness. Indeed, the old soldier never remembered having been so rejoiced and happy as upon the day that Leon La Grange—or little Leon, as the boy soon came to be generally called—arrived to cheer his life and

fireside. Seldom was there known such deep and true affection between youth and man as that which existed between little Leon and his uncle.

Captain Lem strove, by every means in his power, to make his orphan nephew happy, and to banish from the youth's mind the grief consequent upon the loss of his parents. And he succeeded. Leon La Grange became, within six months, the gayest and most joyous youth on the Rio Nueces.

Almost constantly in the saddle, the boy's rides at the "round-ups" in the fall of the year, and during the corraling and branding in the spring, when all were accustomed to camp out for some time, were his great delight; and he was never happier than when coursing over the prairies, or dashing recklessly amid the live-oaks upon his fleet pony.

Yet the captain did not neglect to teach his nephew, during the evenings when they were at home, and he took care to furnish him with all the useful books that could be obtained.

Although small of stature, and somewhat feminine in appearance, Leon's form was symmetrical and well-knit, and he was quite strong, and as quick in motion as a flash. He was inclined to be somewhat of a dandy in dress, and, on this account, would have been a subject for ridicule, had he not been so popular.

Even the roughest and most careless as to dress and general appearance could overlook the extreme neatness of little Leon, and the richness of his costume, when they saw his remarkable skill with the pistol and the lasso, and his perfect horsemanship, to say nothing of his reckless bravery. The old ranchero was very proud of his nephew, and was never so contented and happy as when in his company.

Except this nephew, who had been left well provided for financially, Captain Lem had no other relative but a rascally and dissipated brother, and he did not even know whether this man was still alive. Indeed, he hoped the contrary, for the miserable fellow had sworn revenge on Lem at their last meeting, because he had been refused a loan of money which he demanded.

The ranchero had made his will, bequeathing everything to little Leon, careless as to the existence or non-existence of his brother.

Well he knew that should he die, the black sheep of the family, if alive, would infallibly turn up and hasten to claim his property as next of kin; and, upon ascertaining that he had been defrauded by Leon, would wreak vengeance on the boy, and should he succeed in putting him out of the way, would thus become heir to both fortunes, which would make the worthless adventurer a very wealthy man. And Bill La Grange was one who would not hesitate to commit murder, when money was to be made by it.

This Captain Lem well knew, and it was a cause of great worry and concern to him.

Another circumstance which gave the old soldier more or less anxiety, was the fact that a terrible revenge had been sworn upon him, and by the most vindictive and dangerous wretch that breathed—no other than Juan N. Cortina, the outlaw, the ranch of whose mother was not far from the home of Captain Lem.

Cortina had escaped from Texas into Mexico to avoid arrest and execution, and had, it was reported, begun to organize a bandit horde for the purpose of invading the Lone Star State on a plundering and murdering expedition. Since this report had reached the ears of Captain La Grange, the latter had been more apprehensive of danger to himself and property than his locks betrayed; but little Leon knew nothing of the enmity between his uncle and Cortina.

The cause of that enmity will be explained later on.

Nearly every one, not only in the towns but in the ranches between the Rio Grande and Nueces, knew Juan Cortina as boy and man—knew him to be most daring, desperate and revengeful; one who laughed at the law, and gloried in shedding the blood of the detested Texans, who had been the direct means of taking a big slice of territory from Mexico, and the cause of the death of many thousands of his countrymen.

He himself had been born in Texas after the Mexican war; but, entertaining intense hatred toward the Americans who had conquered his country and slain his people, he lost no opportunity of manifesting it. Having shot dead the Sheriff of Brownsville, he escaped across the Bravo, leaving fourteen indictments against him for murder.

All this Lemuel La Grange well knew, and being thoroughly acquainted with the character



of the man who was destined to become so noted, he felt sure that his ranch and himself would soon be in danger; for Cortina would probably find out the location in the bend, and make a raid to fulfill his oath.

The abode of our friends was a strongly-built log structure, suitable for a block-house fort, with loop-holes pierced for rifle and lookout; the same being built in the central portion of the swell of the bend, and within a large, natural "open."

Several extensive corrals were in the near vicinity, and in the rear of the dwelling were huts of logs, which were the quarters of the slaves; the kitchen, including a huge bake-oven, being near the dwelling. The culinary department was presided over by an old negro, who prided himself on his skill in his profession.

There was not a female at the ranch—indeed, it was not a safe place for women.

Several of the blacks were experienced in hunting cattle, and were excellent drivers; in fact, they understood the stock business in all its branches. Besides these there were Mexicans, who were skilled mustangers. These last had charge of the equine stock.

The dwelling was well furnished, and had a large stock of everything required in the cattle business, as well as food and ammunition, and a plentiful supply of arms. The house consisted of two large rooms, one on each end, the central portion being open to the east and west, or front and rear; this space being used as a dining-room.

No one would be able to find the buildings and corrals without close search near the same, but the presence of the cattle, horses and herders would have indicated that a ranch must be in the vicinity, as also the stock-trails through the timber to the water.

The person of most consequence at the ranch, after the proprietor and his nephew, was a little negro hunchback of about the same age as Leon, but not much over three feet in height. He was very badly deformed, having been thrown from a horse when a mere child.

But, in spite of this, Humpy, as he was called, was remarkably strong and active; indeed, he was little more than bone and muscle, and from constant exercise on horseback had become as agile as a baboon.

This darky dwarf fairly worshiped Leon, and the two often sped over the prairie, afar from the ranch, together, Humpy being always greatly worried when his little "Mars' Leon" left him by himself.

There were frequent visitors at Bend Ranch, as the home of our friends was called, and every one was made welcome by the hospitable host; but especially so—indeed it was considered a great honor, and a time for unusual feasting and enjoyment—when the most intimate friend of Cap'n Lem and little Leon arrived. This friend being the noted scout and ranger, Big Foot Wallace.

### CHAPTER III. THE BANDIT'S VOW.

THE cause of Cortina's having taken an oath of vengeance against Captain La Grange we will now explain.

The old ranchero, about one month previous to the death of his brother and that brother's wife in Corpus Christi, had visited the town of Helena, for the purpose of purchasing some saddle-horses for the use of his *vaqueros*.

There he had lingered for two or three days, the guest of John Littleton, a man of gigantic frame and stature, and who was destined to become quite noted in after years. But it is probable that Captain Lem would not have remained away from his ranch, then near Oakville, for so long a time had not Big Foot Wallace put in an appearance on the day following his arrival.

The three old pards, all being above the ordinary height, and having also far beyond the average strength of most men, formed a trio in the little town that drew the attention of all the residents, and also caused quite a crowd to congregate in the leading bar and billiard-room of the village. The presence of Big Foot alone being sufficient to cause considerable excitement and much interest.

They indulged in liquors to rather a free extent, in fact went in for a jolly time together, and, strange to say, one night when engaged in playing cards in a saloon, Juan Cortina, with a party of Mexicans, entered and called for drinks.

Cortina was, at that time, an associate of various parties of professed mustangers, but who were in reality horse and cattle thieves on a small scale. He was seldom at his mother's

ranch, and had more than once been hunted by the Vigilance Committees of the neighboring towns, but had always escaped them. He was a large man, powerfully built, and of much lighter complexion than the ordinary Mexican; having Castilian blood in his veins.

Many a man had he killed treacherously, but it was generally conceded that he was fearless and desperate, and that he had never shrunk from a fair and open "shooting-match," or border duello, with any Texan when circumstances forced him into such a fight.

But he was a crack shot, and had always killed his opponent.

It was a most desperate and daring move for Juan Cortina thus to enter Helena, for there were several indictments against him for homicide even at that time. But he had eight of the most reckless Greaser cut-throats with him, and doubtless felt confident that he could run that small burg, for a short time at any rate.

It was a strange thing to happen, as it was considered in after years, this meeting in the saloon; but little did Cortina then dream that, within a short time, he would become the most noted bandit chief America had ever known, and that the trio at that card table were destined to become his most bitter and determined enemies—two of them being fated to do much toward annihilating his force of marauders.

Cortina was partially disguised, having his sombrero pulled low over his brow, and a *serape* wound about his neck. The instant he stepped into the saloon he recognized Big Foot, although the back of the old scout was toward him, and he also knew Littleton and La Grange. He knew, too, that either one of them would arrest him, did they recognize him; but he betrayed no concern, and evidently had none, for his safety. This manner of his, whether real or assumed, had made many of the Texans believe that the bandit chief bore a charmed life. It was noticed, however, that, in his desperate feats, he did not appear to care in the slightest degree how many of his followers were slain.

Cortina and the low-browed crew who accompanied him drank their liquor unnoticed by the little party at the card-table, who were intent upon their game, although but small stakes were up. After settling the score, a few muttered words passed between him and the Greasers.

It was as yet too early for the usual crowd of townspeople to be present, but a few came straggling in. These paid little attention to the group of Mexicans, as more than half of the residents of that section of the country were Greasers; and, besides, all were interested in the trio at the card-table.

Cortina and his comrades strolled into the dimly lighted billiard room, there being no players as yet, for consultation. He appeared to have some difficulty in persuading those who were with him to carry out a plan which he proposed, but eventually he succeeded.

It was evident, he thought, that none of the Texans knew him.

His own resolution was taken.

He would kill Wallace, his most dangerous foe, and also Littleton, who was little less to be feared.

He ordered one of the Mexicans to leave the building, repair to the point where the mustangs of the party had been left, untie and coil the neck-ropes, securing them to the horns of the saddles, and then lead the animals to the south side of the building, holding them in readiness for the riders."

The man departed to do the bidding of Cortina, who, being of noted cunning and intelligence in comparison with those with whom he associated, was always recognized as a leader. As it happened, however, and most providentially, the gigantic trio finished their game at just the right moment to save their lives; indeed, they all arose from their chairs as the outlaw followed by his band, stepped again into the bar-room.

When it was too late for retreat, Cortina realized that he was being scrutinized by the keen-eyed scout, and he felt positive from the expression on the old man's face that he was recognized.

He was right.

Big Foot Wallace clapped his hand to his revolver, and yelled:

"Cortina! Or I'm a bald-headed liar! Whoop up, boyees, fer ther door, an' pick triggers lively! We've kerral'd ther cussed cut-throat an' his pards. Don't 'low one ter jump his critter. Scissors! Hyer they come!"

And come the Greasers did.

They answered promptly to a signal yell from their leader, who jerked his revolver, and fired

point-blank at the old scout; but the latter bent low, and avoided the bullet.

It was a wild scene that followed!

The Greasers jerked their *cuchillos*, and rushed headlong, led by Cortina, upon the Texans, who outnumbered them. But, so astounded were nearly all the men of Helena at the daring recklessness and audacity of the bandit chief, that for the moment, they were incapable of motion.

Cap'n Lem, Littleton, and Big Foot, however, were equal to the emergency, and at once the rattle of revolvers sounded through the saloon. Cortina hurled all before him, until within striking distance of his three foes.

He had sown death in his path, and the trio had shot down half of his comrades. All were now mingled together in terrible confusion. Not a soul engaged in the fight could have attempted to describe it.

The outlaw leader was thrown directly against Captain Lem, and the latter, having lost his weapons, at once delivered several terrific blows with his huge fists into the face of Cortina, but soon fell senseless, having been struck by one of the Greasers with the butt of his revolver.

In what manner it occurred none of the Texans could tell; nevertheless it was beyond dispute, as the absence of the outlaw leader, and the fast galloping of steeds proved—Cortina, with two of his band, escaped from the wrangling mass, rushed through the billiard-room, bounded upon their horses, and away they went into the darkness, being soon lost amid the post-oaks, beyond the rear of the line of dwellings.

A more bewildered and dumfounded party of men could scarce have been found than the few Texans within the bar-room, when they regained their feet and looked at each other.

Five Mexicans lay, either dead or dying, while two Texans were corpses and four others severely wounded.

All this had occurred so unexpectedly, and in so short a space of time, that it was no wonder the survivors were astounded, especially at the miraculous escape of Cortina.

Both Littleton and Big Foot were stabbed, and Captain Lem lay as one dead, his head being greatly bruised and swollen.

Chase was at once given by several of the men of Helena, Wallace and Littleton taking the lead, but without success. The darkness favored the outlaws.

It became known afterward that Cortina had been fearfully bruised, and that his arm was dislocated by the powerful blows delivered by Captain La Grange, and the bandit leader was laid up for several weeks before being able again to mount a horse.

Soon after Captain Lem received at his ranch a letter from Cortina, swearing that the writer would have revenge upon the only man who had ever disgraced him by a blow in the face, and vowing that he would, at no distant day, tie a rope around the captain's neck, and jerk him up a limb with his own hands.

At first the old ranchero was somewhat anxious and alarmed, for he knew that the outlaw chief was capable of any crime, and he had many lawless followers who might make a descent upon the ranch at any time, and thus enable Cortina to fulfill his oath to the letter. But, as months passed, and he had not been known to have been in the vicinity of Oakville, or even Helena, the captain became free from apprehension; and, soon after, Leon came to cheer his life, when Cortina was, for the time, forgotten.

He was reported, however, to be in command of a large force, made up of the very scum of Mexico, and about to invade Texas.

This was after he had shot dead the sheriff of Brownsville, who had attempted to arrest him; that officer having no less than fifteen indictments against him for murder.

Cortina escaped across the Bravo, and at once began to collect escaped peons, ladrones, and small bands of outlaws; forming quite an army, having their rendezvous in the mountains of Mexico, near the Rio Grande, from which their intention was to devastate the American side of the river, burning the ranches, slaying the people, and stealing all the stock they could secure.

Then it was that Lemuel La Grange became again much concerned and apprehensive—and, indeed, he was now more so than ever, for little Leon was with him, and he feared Cortina might capture the youth, rack his heart through the boy and hang him later on. Thus, too, the property of both would go to the captain's ruffianly and disreputable brother, for, at that time, the old ranchero had become convinced that Bill was still alive.



Had Lemuel known that William La Grange had heard of the death of their brother Louis and his wife in Corpus Christi, of the adoption of Leon, and the contents of the will—had Captain Lem known this, and also that Bill had learned of the fight at Helena, and the oath of the bandit chief, with whom he had formed a compact—then, indeed, he would have had solid grounds for being apprehensive in regard to his life and property.

Such, indeed, was the case.

Cortina, having been assisted in his escape across the river, into Matamoras, after he had killed the sheriff in Brownsville, by no less a person than William La Grange, who had good reasons for wishing the outlaw to live, felt the same in reference to his new ally. Bill had promised a heavy reward to Cortina, did the latter succeed in slaying his brother, and now little Leon was included.

This the bandit chief had readily promised to do, and that without any urging, for he would be killing two birds with one stone—that is, he would earn the reward and keep his oath of vengeance at the same time.

During the interval between the date of Cortina's repulse from Helena and the slaying of the sheriff, the outlaw had wandered through the chaparrals on the American side of the river with a small party of Mexican cattle-thieves, and had gained a knowledge of all the paths and fords, and also the exact location of many ranches, with their ranges and amount of stock.

And all this time he had in mind the forming of his brigade of bandits, and the extensive thieving operations, rapine, and murder, which he afterward carried out.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### BLUFF BILL.

It had been the policy of Bill La Grange to keep aloof from his brother, and lead the latter to believe that he was either dead or had left the country for good.

He was known as a great "bluffer" at cards when playing poker; hence he had acquired the *sobriquet* of Bluff, or Bluffing Bill.

Had he not succeeded now and then in "cleaning out" a planter of his cash, by "priming" his intended victim with drink, oft-times drugged at that, he would have been nothing else but a bum, in rags, and destitute.

Luck, however, seemed suddenly to have been thrust upon him after his visit to his brother at Oakville, when Captain Lem had refused to assist him in a pecuniary way, except by furnishing him with a respectable suit of clothing, and a sufficient sum to pay his way to Galveston.

As stated, Bill left the ranch swearing vengeance. And he meant it. His intense anger and disappointment nearly sobered him for once.

And from that time on, next to his passion for gaming, and his love for liquor, was longing for revenge upon his rich brother. He did not take into consideration the fact that he had no one to blame except himself for being worse off in this world's goods than his more respectable brother.

Bill retained his ragged attire, bundled up that which had been given him, and, taking passage on a coaster, went to Galveston.

There, at the Island City, he disposed of the suit with which Captain Lem had provided him, and, with the small sum thus realized, he frequented the lowest gambling dens until he had won quite a sum of money; for he was an adept at cards, and knew all the tricks of professional gamblers.

But, not for one moment did Bill La Grange lose sight of his revenge.

His brother in Corpus Christi he had not gone near, supposing him to be almost as poorly off as himself.

He did not remain long in Galveston, but went to New Orleans, where his stay was protracted to a couple of years; and, when he returned to Texas, he was tolerably well fixed, financially. However, the yellow fever soon broke out in the Island City, and Bluff Bill—being a coward of course—hastened down the coast, and thence to Brownsville, on the Rio Grande. At that place he became acquainted with many of the lawless characters of that section of the State.

Among these was Juan Cortina, who had become a noted desperado, and was feared by many of the officers of justice.

It was then that Bill learned of the death of Louis and his wife, and also that considerable property had been left; and he hastened to

Corpus Christi, to ascertain if he had been remembered in his brother's will. To his intense fury, he learned that not only had Louis La Grange been quite wealthy, but that Captain Lemuel had been given the control of everything, including the guardianship of the son and heir.

For once in his life, Bluff Bill found that he had been bluffed.

He was furious.

Now he had a double incentive for revenge.

He realized that he had an opportunity to enter a game, and play for an immense fortune; and that, too, with a certainty of winning. There must be blood spilled in the game, of course, but a murder or two, more or less—even of his own relations—would not cause Bill La Grange to hesitate. It was a trifling matter with him, and then he would become a rich man.

About this time, the villain fell in with a follower of Cortina; and, learning from him of the outlaw's plans, it occurred to him that his best move would be to ingratiate himself into the confidence and friendship of Cortina, and through him gain all that he desired.

With this object in view, Bluff Bill hastened at once to Brownsville, but was greatly disappointed on finding that the bandit chief had not been in or near the town in some time. However, he met two of Cortina's associates, secured their services as spies, and sent them to Oakville to find out all they could in regard to the location of Captain Lem's ranch.

These two ruffians departed on their mission, well mounted and equipped at Bill's expense, and with several doubloons in their pockets.

Bluff Bill was, of course, very impatient; but he began purchasing in a secret manner, from this and that man in the town who chanced to get broke, all the revolvers, rifles and knives they would part with. He knew the possession of these would greatly please Cortina. Money was plenty, but arms of American manufacture were scarce and difficult to procure.

His suspense was eventually ended.

One of the spies returned and brought very gratifying information.

Captain La Grange, it seemed, was about removing to the extreme border, to establish a new ranch on the Rio Leona. The spy, Pablo Castillo, also gave his employer the intelligence that Cortina was then near his mother's ranch, and would soon be in Brownsville.

Bluff Bill was wild with joy.

This was increased when Pablo mentioned the fact that his chief had also vowed vengeance on the Oakville ranchero.

Bill then hired the Greaser to return to Captain Lem's ranch, rejoin his comrade, Juan Garcia, and persuade the latter to enter the service of the old ranchero. Pablo, being well paid, readily agreed to this.

Not only Juan but himself were soon in the employ of Lemuel La Grange, having been engaged by him to take charge of the mares to be purchased in Mexico, and the horses and mules that were to be driven from the Oakville ranch to the Leona.

At length Cortina, who had known through a messenger that Bluff Bill wished to see him on business, arrived in Brownsville. The night that followed was passed by the two worthies in drinking and smoking, and the bandit chief was greatly gratified on being presented with plenty of arms and ammunition by his new confederate.

He agreed to send a sufficient number of men, as soon as he could collect them on the Mexican side of the river, under the command of Bluff Bill, to raid the ranch and capture the old ranchero and his little nephew. If possible, he himself would command the raid.

Cortina felt confident of success.

Bill, of course, must be thoroughly disguised.

But, that very night, when under the influence of liquor, the outlaw leader shot down the sheriff in cold blood, and then escaped to Mexico. No one knew that Bluff Bill had any connection with him or the crime.

The next night found Juan Cortina in his first camp as an acknowledged bandit, and from which he began at once to collect recruits.

A month after this first establishment of a rendezvous, there were nearly three hundred of the most brutal cut-throats, and swarthy miscreants, in the camp; all jubilant at having for their chief Juan Cortina, and at the prospect of revenge upon the Texans; not to speak of any amount of plunder. In fact, to them, there appeared a joyous life ahead.

It was not until then that Cortina sent for Bluff Bill, although he had more in view than the raid upon the ranch of Captain Lem.

#### CHAPTER V.

##### DANGER FROM ANOTHER QUARTER.

THERE had not been, up to the time when Cortina had succeeded in getting to his mountain camp in Mexico, any cause on the part of our friends at Bend Ranch for apprehension of any immediate danger from Indians or lawless Mexicans. Indeed, no one at the bend had ever felt the least concern as to their safety, except Captain Lem, and he kept his own counsel.

Captain Lem endeavored to appear unconcerned and cheerful when in the company of his nephew, yet he could not refrain from warning the boy against venturing far from the ranch. From this, the youth judged that his uncle really apprehended danger; but he never ventured to make any remarks on the subject, except to little Humpy, the negro boy.

However, Leon and the black dwarf were more cautious and watchful in consequence, for they felt that Bend Ranch was a very dangerous place in the event of a raid, as enemies could advance under cover of the bottom-timber and the undergrowth, and, gaining the corrals, fire from behind the pickets. The captain had thought of this, but there was no way in which he could improve the defenses.

He was, also, not without his suspicions in regard to his new hands, Pablo and Garcia. He had not liked their appearance, when he had given them more attention, after he had learned of the threatened raid of Mexican bandits. Previous to this he had taken but little notice of the Greasers.

However, it did not seem reasonable to suppose that the two Mexicans could be in any way connected with Cortina, for they had been in the employ of the captain some time before the rumor reached him that the bandit chief was on the Rio Grande. Besides, Captain Lem did not believe that Cortina knew of his having left the old ranch in the vicinity of Oakville, much less that there was one on the Leona, owned by him.

For all that, he knew that the outlaw had spies in all that section of the country, and that even the Texas-Mexicans, who were apparently good citizens, secretly sympathized with Cortina.

Thus it will be seen that the old soldier was in no enviable frame of mind. In fact, he even meditated the abandonment of Bend Ranch until more safe and settled times, or else sending Leon back to Oakville.

It will also be seen that the dark clouds were at length in reality hovering over him and his loved nephew, and that two most ruthless enemies, with great power to back them, were now bent upon his ruin.

Had Captain La Grange known the true state of affairs—known that his disreputable and unprincipled brother was in Cortina's camp, and had formed a compact with the noted outlaw, which included the murder of himself and little Leon, then indeed he would have had good ground for anxiety and concern. Or, had he known that Pablo and Garcia were in the pay of his wretched brother, he would doubtless have shot them both, and abandoned the ranch without delay.

At this time the whole force of Texan Rangers, consisting of three companies, commanded by Captains Burleson, Dalrymple, and Conner, were driving the hostile Indians from the Western border. Yet, notwithstanding Cortina knew of the fact that no ranger force could be brought against him, and that he felt little or no concern in connection with the United States troops stationed at the different posts along the Rio Grande, he delayed his march into Texas until the following year.

But, we have now to do with the small party which he saw fit to detach from his command, for the purpose of wreaking his vengeance upon Lemuel La Grange, and also favoring his friend Bluff Bill, who remained in his camp, having asserted in Brownsville that he was on his way to New Orleans. The latter had acted with extreme caution, for he knew if he won the big stake for which he was now playing, it would be of no benefit to him should the Texans discover that he was acting in concert with Juan Cortina, for, in that case, he would be hanged to the first tree that was convenient, as soon as discovered.

Bright and early next morning little Leon and his body-guard, Humpy, galloped from the corral, out from the timber, and down toward the entrance of the bend. Bright and joyous was the youth, after taking a laughing leave of his uncle, and promising to bring home a couple of haunches of venison or antelope meat.

Humpy, as has been said, was far from being handsome, but it was easily seen that he was naturally of a gentle and kindly disposition.



His chin and mouth proclaimed great firmness, and the glance of his eye indicated fearlessness and bravery. He cut a comical figure, however, especially in the saddle, as the top of his head reached scarcely as high as the mustang's ears, and the only head-covering he wore was a red kerchief around his cranium.

The Mexicans looked upon the deformed darky with feelings akin to superstition and dread.

The animal Humpy bestrode, though small, was an equine beauty. It was a half-breed, hardy and fleet.

That of Leon was larger, and with long, clean and slender limbs. It was a "pinto," as the Mexicans call an animal that is diversified in color with spots and splashes. Among the Texans, this is termed a "paint," which means the same thing.

"Heigh-ho!" exclaimed little Leon; "this is gay and festive. You wouldn't catch me live in a cramped-up town again for any consideration. Give me the free life of the prairies every time. How is it with you, Humpy?"

"Golly, Mars' Leon, I's jes' gay when I's 'long wid yeou, no odds whar it am—dat's me fer sho'! But I kinder takes to de bottom, on 'count ob de 'possum. Yah! yah!"

The white boy joined in the laugh.

"That's the nigger everywhere," he said. "But, after all, 'possum ain't bad eating—almost equal to roast pig. Did you see Pablo, Garcia, and Francisco this morning?"

"Yas; dey done gone down de bend wid de hosses, jes' 'bout daylight, Mars' Leon."

"To be sure. I see the herd now. Francisco is always alone, though. He don't appear to fancy those other fellows."

"Dat am whar his head's level, I reckon. Dis chile done got no use for dem. Dey is allus talkin' low 'tween darselves."

"I don't like the looks of them, either," said Leon. "However, they can't run our herd off without leaving a broad plain trail. But, I say, shall we go up or down the river, Humpy?"

"Jes' like you say, Mars' Leon; but dar's a heap mo' game critters up creek."

"That settles it. Up we go, and we'll have a prime prairie dinner. You've got everything along, I suppose? All right! We'll skirt around to the east, to avoid frightening the herd."

Away the youthful pair rode, passing within a quarter of a mile of the animals; the Greasers doffing their sombreros, in salutation, from a distance. Their ride was a somewhat extensive one. Leon shot a fine young buck, just before noon, and also a turkey; and they repaired to the river-bank, where they built a fire, and cooked a meal that would have been enjoyed by an epicure.

The afternoon was nearly past when, after a *siesta*, they again took to the plain, shooting another buck, just before sunset.

Barely had the twain secured the game to their saddles, when Humpy called out, pointing southward:

"Gor-a'mighty, Mars' Leon, look dar! Dem Greasers 'pears p'intin' fer we-uns mighty peart."

"Great Scott!" burst from the lips of little Leon, in astonishment. "But what a lot of them there are! So many of them together must mean mischief. I'm afraid they know us, and intend us harm."

"Cut loose the venison, Humpy, and mount in a hurry! We must make a short cut across the river, and strike for the ranch at the nearest point. They are bent on capturing us, I see. Come on. Spur for life!"

So saying, both sped at headlong rate toward the timber.

It was little wonder that Leon La Grange thought the cavalcade was after him and his companion. They were now less than a quarter of a mile distant, and some thirty in number; and they plied quirt and spur, doubling the speed of their animals.

At that short distance, the boys could see that their pursuers were Mexicans, and they felt no little concern for the safety of the ranch and stock. They were confident that they could themselves escape, for it was apparent at a glance that the mustangs of the band were considerably jaded, as they galloped in a wavering and laborious manner.

The animals of little Leon and Humpy, on the contrary, were comparatively fresh.

Before dashing into the timber, the youth glanced down the same, and perceived a single horseman, riding rapidly toward the entrance of the bend. This man had evidently come from the direction of the Rio Grande, as had the horde of Greasers.

Humpy also saw the lone rider, and both were puzzled as to who he could be.

But there was no time for speculation upon the unexpected appearance of strangers, where so few had been seen since locating the ranch. The pair sped along a winding path through the undergrowth to the river, plunged their horses into the stream at once, and forded. They hesitated not for an instant, but spurred on for the north plain through the belt of woods on the opposite side of the stream.

The crossing had greatly decreased the distance between them and their pursuers, as their progress had been necessarily slow through the water, and they heard the crashing of the undergrowth on the south bank as the Greasers dashed after them. But Leon and Humpy were screened by the bushes before the Mexicans plunged into the stream.

It was some consolation to know that the outlaws would lose ground in fording, as they themselves had done.

What would Leon La Grange have thought, had he known that his miscreant uncle was leading the Greasers—that his object was to deliver him into the hands of Cortina, the bandit, who would slay both brother and nephew? Then he, William La Grange, would inherit the fortunes of both.

Little Leon had upon a certain occasion, when the speakers believed him asleep, overheard Captain Lem and Big Foot Wallace talking of Bill La Grange in no complimentary terms; but he had refrained from ever inquiring of his uncle in regard to their dissipated and reckless relative.

But the two lads were now greatly excited by the turn affairs had taken.

Never had they been in danger from any human enemies before, and they had no fear of the beasts they so frequently encountered; consequently, strange emotions filled their minds, principally those of bewilderment and anxiety, with reference to the safety of the ranch.

Not a word spoke they, but pressed on.

Not a shout or yell came from the pursuers, and this made the chase seem all the more impressive to Little Leon and his dusky pard; the big eyes of the latter bulging out in a strange manner, and his head being often jerked around to enable him to cast glances behind him. His young master rode in the lead, the path not permitting the two to ride abreast.

But they were destined soon to meet with another and a most astounding surprise, and be rendered nearly demoralized by fright.

This surprise was a terrible one. They had reached the outer margin of the timber.

Leon, with a heavy sigh of relief, spurred Pinto, his horse, free from the undergrowth, but instantly he jerked the animal to its haunches, while from his pale lips came the ejaculation:

"Great heavens! We are lost, Humpy! We are lost!"

"Great Gor-a'mighty!"

This was the only utterance of the deformed African, but the words and the intonation of voice expressed much.

What was it they saw?

A horrible sight, indeed!

Some three-score of Comanche braves, in all their horrid paraphernalia of savage war-paint, daubed and befeathered, their lances glittering in the light of the setting sun, their plumes flaunting and quirts flying, as they lashed their half-wild steeds in a course directly toward the paralyzed youths, and not more than four hundred yards distant!

#### CHAPTER VI.

##### IN HIS POWER.

BOTH little Leon and Humpy knew that their lives depended upon immediate flight, back the way they had come, yet, for a moment, they sat upon their steeds incapable of motion or even thought.

Death, behind and before them, it seemed; yet the death by torture was sure in their front, while it was possible that those in the rear might not seek their lives!

There appeared, however, but the slightest hope of escape. None at all at first glance, but young La Grange was not long in forming a plan for the attempt. He had taken in the entire situation. Could they not dart back into the timber a short distance, then crash through the thick undergrowth, leaving the path, and before either the Mexicans or the Indians reached the point where they had left it, be a safe distance from both?

And would not the Comanches dash into the bottom-timber in pursuit? This would cause a meeting between Greasers and red-men, and a fight, which would enable them to escape, besides lessening the number of the foes, who would doubtless attack the ranch.

These thoughts flashed like lightning into the mind of little Leon, and we must concede that, under the circumstances, he displayed a remarkable amount of good sense and strategic talent.

Instantly he whirled his horse about and dashed into the shades, crying out:

"Follow me, Humpy! Keep close, or you will be killed! We may yet escape, but our lives hang by a hair."

The little negro made no response. His tongue seemed to be glued to the roof of his mouth, and he could not articulate a syllable.

However, he kept close after his young master.

Strange to relate, the Indians did not send out their whoops of exultation, as was customary with them upon discovering, when on the war-path, whites who seemed to be in their power. These whoops were given more to terrify those whom they wished to capture than aught else, thus rendering them unfit for reasoning as to the best and most favorable means of escape.

Possibly the silence of the savages was caused, on the present occasion, by their beholding the elfish-looking negro boy, and their belief that poor Humpy was "bad medicine."

But that silence was to prove favorable to them, and prove the death of others who might have escaped, had the fierce cries warned them of the approach of savage foes.

Little Leon had not gone more than twenty yards when he drove spurs deep, guiding his horse from the path, and plunging through the network of thorny undergrowth. His strange attendant rode close in the rear, and both listened intently for sounds from the direction of the river, whence they soon heard the Mexicans approaching at full speed.

The sound of many hoofs upon the deeply-worn path which, though trampled hard, was moist and yielding, were to be plainly heard; as also was the dull tremble of the war-party of Comanches, as they urged their wild-eyed mustangs over the sward of the plain and toward the timber. By this time, Leon and Humpy were fifty yards from the path.

It was evident that the Greasers had heard nothing of the approach of the war-party. The latter, also, were unaware of the presence of the Mexicans.

From the fact that the path was so narrow and winding, only the first riders in the line, after the red marauders entered the timber, could see each other. Therefore, neither party would be in a position to judge of the strength of the other.

This ignorance would cause great confusion, but the white outlaws would, without doubt, be confident that the reds were in full force. They could not reasonably think otherwise.

Little Leon, though greatly excited, thought of all this.

Humpy was completely dazed.

Soon they halted, and listened intently.

They were wasting time, for they could have insured their escape by plunging on down the river, assured that the attention of both parties of their deadly foes would be drawn, and held to each other for some time; yet, for their lives, they could not speed on.

A strange, but most intense and deep influence seemed to chain them to the spot.

Not long had the youth thus to wait.

Out shot a single war-whoop, most fierce and startling, quickly followed by the war-cries of Indians, who interpreted the signal whoop, and knew by it that the advance brave of their party had discovered others than the youthful mounted pair, then there came yells of amazement and terror from the astounded Mexicans, scattering shots, and a terrific crashing and plunging of snorting mustangs through the dense chaparral.

For a few moments, the fugitive youths listened in great excitement, mingled with dread, to the Babel of sounds; then, becoming aware that the Indians had separated, and were dashing toward the river by other paths to intercept the Greasers—which movement greatly endangered their own safety—both Leon and Humpy drove spurs home, and, with pricked ears and snorts of affright, their ponies bounded through the bushes, in a course parallel with the river.

Both youths knew that they had, by halting, greatly endangered their safety; for, the sounds made by the Comanches proved that the latter were approaching the very point at which they had paused. Indeed, some of the red-men were east of them, and the two youngsters were obliged to quarter toward the stream, to avoid the red foe.

Meanwhile the din was terrific, the plunging into the river being distinctly heard by Leon



and Humpy, as the pair, in quite a desperate and demoralized condition, reached the very bank of the Leona; having almost miraculously escaped being killed or captured by the Comanches, favored as they had been by the din of conflict.

It was a most critical moment for them.

They knew not what to do, or which way to turn; but Leon decided that the most favorable move to make was to ford the river, thus giving them a chance to escape, as he thought, by way of the open plain to the entrance of the big bend.

More, even, than safety to himself and Humpy depended upon this move, as they could, if successful, warn the *vaqueros*, and assist them in driving the herds to the ranch and the corrals.

Leon beckoned to the little negro to follow, and urged his own pony into the river.

The next moment, both were in the stream; the animals swimming, while the youths held their revolvers clear of the water.

To their great concern they discovered, too late, that the bank on the opposite side was both steep and high, and impossible to surmount. They were, consequently, forced to turn their horses down-stream, and swim with the current; eagerly watching for a favorable place, at which they could clamber up the bank.

So intent were they in scanning the south bank, that they did not observe a horseman swimming his animal down-stream behind them. A moment after they had turned their horses into the current, this lone rider appeared around a bend, just above them.

His eyes seemed to be filled with the most abject fright and horror, while he cast glances backward, as if, at any moment, he expected death in some hideous form to overtake him.

It was William La Grange!

But the face of Bluff Bill was stained, and he wore a wig of long and coarse black hair, while his face was smooth shaven.

His apparel was of Mexican make, and a huge sombrero was upon his head.

The desperate, hunted look of terror, which was blended with despair, became, however, suddenly transformed to one of the most vengeful exultation and joyous surprise, as the plotting miscreant discovered the two lads in front—fugitives like himself. Satan seemed to befriend Bluff Bill.

He knew that he could not avoid being discovered by the boys, and he urged on his horse, causing the beast to swim with much greater speed than before.

He was but a short distance from one whom he had sworn that he would overtake—had sworn that he should be his captive, and his victim!

He had risked much that he might get his nephew in his power, and he did not propose, at such a moment as this, to be defeated. He had proclaimed his intentions to the yellow-skinned marauders under his command, and incited them on to the capture by offers of a heavy reward for the Texan youth.

But he and his followers had been terrified beyond measure, besides some having lost their lives, and others being wounded, by the totally unexpected encounter with the Comanche war-party; and that, at the very point where they had expected to overtake Leon and his black companion.

Bill La Grange had escaped death by a hair's breadth, so to speak, and knew that he was even yet in deadly peril; but the sight of Leon banished his terrors, and nerved him on to fulfill his oath, and play his best card in the game in which he had engaged. The winning of this would make him a man of wealth, besides glutting his thirst for revenge upon those whom, though closely related to him, he hated with all the strength of his vile nature.

And the cruel Fates seemed to favor him.

The two lads soon disappeared around an abrupt bend of the river, without having perceived him.

No sooner had the point of this bend been passed than Leon uttered a low and joyous outcry, at the same time turning his horse to the bank, the animal with ease emerging from the stream, the water shallowing gradually to the mouth of the wash-out. Up this the now greatly relieved youths urged their dripping ponies, the banks being some ten feet in height.

This gully, although deep, was narrow, and wound about in a very crooked manner, which was favorable to Bluff Bill, who was in hot pursuit. The ruffian, with revolver in hand, drove deep his spurs, and raising the weapon in air, dashed around a bend of the wash-out, and directly upon the unsuspecting pair, who were in-

tent upon watching their front, not having the slightest suspicion that there could be any danger in their rear.

The pony of little Humpy sprang in affright against the side of the gully, but, at the same moment, a fierce blow fell upon the head of the negro boy, and he dropped from the saddle, the blood gushing over his face.

As the beast bounded forward with a snort, Leon jerked his mustang to its haunches in the greatest amazement, and glanced behind him just in time to see the revolver descending. The sight so dumfounded him that he was for the moment incapable of action, and that fatal pause bereft him of sense and liberty.

Another cruel blow felled Leon La Grange in the same manner as it had little Humpy.

All this time the yells and whoops and scattering shots had not ceased; indeed, but a very short time had passed since the meeting of the war-party of braves with the outlaws of the Rio Grande.

Bluff Bill, with a half-suppressed yell of triumph, sprang from his saddle, and catching up the senseless body of his nephew, remounted and urged his steed up the wash-out toward the south plain, and away from the river.

## CHAPTER VII.

### A RETREAT AND A SURPRISE.

BLUFF BILL had been in the lead of the Mexican miscreants during the headlong dash after Leon and Humpy, when the two youths were first discovered on the plain; and he kept in front, for he believed no danger could come to him, that the affrighted lads would not make any attempt at defense.

He felt positive that he could capture his nephew before the latter could reach anywhere near the ranch. Indeed, he did not believe that the lads would be able to keep ahead for a hundred yards beyond the river a ter fording.

In consequence, the villain felt secure and exultant. He even resolved to make the capture himself, thus saving the reward he had offered. This he knew he could accomplish with an effort, as his horse was superior to the other animals of the band, both in speed and endurance.

Bluff Bill spurred deep, and was first across the river, keeping the lead; until, suddenly, he had been compelled to halt, while a shriek of terror had escaped him. The muzzle of his steed was within five feet of that of a wild-eyed mustang, upon which sat a hideously-painted Indian, with flaunting feathers, and bow already gripped for instant use.

The far-sounding signal-whoop had almost paralyzed him, but the brain of the wretch was active, though he felt that he was on the very brink of death.

His extreme cowardice saved him.

Prodding his horse with his bowie, and sinking low to avoid the deadly feathered shaft of the red-skin, Bluff Bill jerked the animal aside just in time to give room for the Mexican who rode next him. He, knowing nothing of the danger ahead until too late to command himself sufficiently to halt, allowed his steed to bear him into the jaws of death; for a second arrow, fired from the bow of the leading Comanche, pierced his vitals, and, with a fearful shriek, the outlaw fell to the ground.

Then followed the wild and unearthly war-cries of the savages, and the yells of fright and horror from the Greasers, who now fired their *escopetas* without aim, wildly, and in any and every direction.

Some forced their mustangs headlong against others, the beasts being hurled to the earth, and crushing their masters' limbs; thus leaving them to become captives and victims to the diabolical torture of the Comanches.

Luckily for Bluff Bill, as he dashed in terror and desperation to one side, his horse plunged through a thicket and landed in another path. Down this the beast instinctively and frantically sped; the thorns tearing both the clothing and the flesh of the plotting miscreant, who clung in abject terror about his steed's neck, each moment looking for a steel-pointed shaft to tear into his flesh.

No thought was there in Bill LaGrange's mind then of either his brother or Leon, or of the fortune he had so oft gloated over in his imagination. No thought had he except of escape, which, as the fiendish sounds filled his ears, he had little hope of gaining.

But on went the terrified horse, soon plunging into the river, and when the water splattered over his fright-contorted face, Bill arose in his saddle and guided his mustang down with the current, for the villain had at once realized that the opposite bank could not be surmounted. Little hope had he of escape, even upon gaining

the river, for the bottom-timber resounded with whoops of war and exultant yells from the savages and shrieks of terror and agony from his yellow-skinned confederates.

He heard, however, one after another plunge into the river further up the stream, at the point where they had forded when in pursuit of the two youths, and he decided that his aim must be to join those who escaped to the south side of the stream, believing that he could reach a point at which his animal could surmount the bank. In that case he would have some chance to escape.

But as he saw no favorable place after swimming some distance, and, from the whoops of the Indians, knew that the braves were speeding toward the stream to strike the same further down, and in that event they would have him at their mercy; then, indeed, did the cowardly miscreant tremble in abject terror, which, however, as we have seen, was soon after banished.

It was at that moment that he discovered little Leon in the river.

This was both a joyous surprise and a bitter disappointment to Bluff Bill. He had entertained hopes that both the lads had been slain by the Indians; thus, without especial effort on his part, ridding him of one of the obstructions in his way to wealth.

However, he felt that thus to see Leon in a position that seemed favorable for himself to effect a capture, was far better than to have his nephew's fate uncertain, with the chance always that he might appear, and thus mar Bill's plans and defeat him altogether.

With fiendish malignity the dastard proceeded to attempt the capture of little Leon, and this he accomplished in the manner previously detailed.

But we must now return to the scene of the meeting between the yellow and red marauders.

The Comanches were as greatly surprised as were the Mexicans, at meeting a body of foes; and the dense thickets prevented the former from making a charge which would doubtless have annihilated the Greasers. The latter were also, greatly hindered and confused from the same cause.

However, the outlaws and the animals they bestrode were more accustomed to chaparral traveling than the Indians and their ponies. But, though they well knew this, they were aware also that unless they made quick time they would be, while in the stream, at the mercy of their red foes.

The latter were now coming on at full speed, crowding toward the point of alarm with loud war-whoops, and striving in every direction to gain a chance of sending a deadly shaft, and thus win the first scalp on that war-path.

They had believed the pale-face youth and the black nondescript, the latter of whom had so astonished them, and filled them with superstitious wonder, had purposely appeared in order to lure them on to destruction; and this belief had been strengthened when the signal whoop had sounded from their front, thus proving that other enemies had been sighted in addition to the pair they were attempting to capture.

Consequently, the red-men, who were of course ignorant of the number of their enemies, were not as prompt and confident as they would otherwise have been; although each was ashamed to betray any backwardness in the dash after the strange foes who had so suddenly and unexpectedly barred their way. But, no sooner did they decide, by the sound of the affrighted yells of the bandits, not only that the latter were terrified, but that they were even then in headlong retreat, than with increased war-cries, they lashed their mustangs in chase.

A half-dozen of the Mexicans, who had been in the lead, were pierced by the deadly arrows; the ominous twang of the bows cutting the air in every direction, while the sharp reports of the carbines of the Greasers added to the fiendish din.

The hindmost Comanches, realizing that they could not force their way to the front, past their comrades, sought other paths; and those, who had been in the front, found every way now blocked by dead and dying men and horses.

Maddened by the sight of blood, and the war spirit of their natures, those in the lead sprang to the ground, and tore off the scalps of the prostrate Mexicans.

Thus was the onward dash checked for a brief space.

Then remounting, on passed the red marauders, insane for blood, their wild war-whoops shooting from their throats and their black snake-like eyes flashing.

For a few minutes the din was terrific. The



miss and crack of quirts, the snort and plunge of fright and pain-maddened mustangs, with the loud whoops and signal-yells of the savages and the appalled outcries of the bandits—all these made up one continuous discordant din that was torturing to the ears.

But with bated breath, and gazing in horrible anticipation over their shoulders, the outlaws forced their animals through the waters and up the opposite bank, but three of them being in the stream when the braves dashed through the bushes upon the north bank of the river.

These three Mexicans, knowing that their doom was sealed did they remain upon their horses, hurled themselves at once into the river and sunk beneath the surface, just as a score of feathered shafts cut the air and hurtled around and into the heads and necks of the swimming mustangs. These plunged for a moment frantically, and then sunk beneath the on-rolling waters.

Their riders could not remain long beneath the surface; but, as they had swam with the current, they arose at such a distance as to prevent the Indians from obtaining sure shots, and, as the flight of arrows came, the Greasers again sunk. This caused the red-men to urge their beasts along the bank of the river, and thus, by the misfortune of these three members of the band, the remainder of the Greasers were given time to place some distance between themselves and the war-party.

As may be presumed, the bandits did not spare horse-flesh, nor did they dare risk themselves upon the south plain, but kept within the border of the timber for some distance; when suddenly, with an outcry of joy and relief, Bluff Bill rode out from a covert, and holding up little Leon to the view of his confederates, yelled out:

"Carajo! I have the boy! Now for the old man. Come on! Curse those red devils; who would have thought of meeting them here? How many of our brave pards have been shot? But, I see nine are absent. However, some of them may yet turn up like myself; but I'll bet none of them had as tight a squeeze as I've come through.

"Hanged if I haven't played bluff the whole time, and swept the board against the whole gang of red yelpers! But we must git up and git. Let's head for the ranch, for there the Comanches will point, even if they don't strike our trail and follow.

"We're in a dangerous posish now, pards, but we'll scrouge through, I reckon. Luck is on my side dead sure, but I thought my last card had been flapped when that red in the front popped upon me, and gave his yelp.

"Come on! There is no time for talk. We'll watch our chance to corral Cap'n Lem."

To say that the Mexicans were astounded at the appearance of their leader, would be putting it mild; for they had believed beyond doubt that he had been the first man to fall, as he had been in the lead. His escape to them was a mystery, and it was a deeper one still how he had effected the capture of Leon La Grange; thus accomplishing a great part of the object of their lawless expedition.

The faces of the entire swarthy band were stamped with terror, and perfectly ashen; for they feared, more than aught else on earth, the tortures of the Comanches. They had halted their horses when Bluff Bill burst forth from the bushes, and their first thought had been that the Indians were again upon them; their relief was, therefore, great when they beheld their leader, and also to know that he had secured the boy from Bend Ranch—although there was not one among them who did not regret, of course, that he had not been the lucky person to win the reward.

But the impressive silence that ruled the vicinity of the scene of their recent disastrous meeting with the red-men was ominous of danger; for, even while they were thus halted, the Indians were stealthily making their way toward them.

Consequently, no second order was needed to cause the bandits once more to ply spurs and lash quirts; and, on the yellow marauders sped as before, riding as fast as was possible in the shadows of the outer timber; for the evening was now upon them. But a faint red glow in the west marked the position which the sun had but recently occupied.

But, scarce more than twenty rods had the outlaw band proceeded, when like a projectile from a catapult, out from the dark shades shot a horseman, who, with a far-sounding and terrible yell that was most furious and vengeful in intonation, dashed directly upon the dumfounded and appalled Greasers!

Twin spurts of flame flashed from the deadly tubes of his revolvers.

Down went the horse of Bluff Bill, the animal rearing in affright just in the nick of time to receive in its brain the bullet which would otherwise have killed the plotting villain upon its back.

Surely William La Grange seemed to bear a charmed life, seemed to be specially protected by the cruel and wicked Fates, as far as his personal safety was concerned.

Two Mexicans fell from their frantically-bounding mustangs. Then, before the survivors could act or even think, Bluff Bill lay senseless from a blow delivered by the strange horseman with his revolver, and little Leon, clasped tight and shielded from shot, was borne from their view—the rescuer disappearing in the shades as quickly as he made his appearance.

A volley was sent after him, but a taunting laugh came in reply.

"Carajo!" yelled the Greasers. "It is *El Diablo*, Big Foot Wallace!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE OLD SCOUT ON THE ALERT.

It has been mentioned that, at the time Leon and Humpy first perceived the horde of Mexicans dashing over the plains toward them, a single horseman was seen toward the east galloping in the direction of the entrance to the big bend.

This was none other than Big Foot Wallace, and the keen eyes of the old scout had detected the band of outlaws and also the two youths. The heart of Wallace was tortured greatly by this discovery; for, although such a long distance away, he well knew that his little favorite, Leon La Grange, and Humpy, who always accompanied him, were the two who were nearest the timber, and also that they were in great peril.

Big Foot had seen that the band were Mexicans, and he well knew that such a number would not be together unless bent on mischief.

He felt assured, as well, that they were a party of the bandits of Cortina, bent upon some vengeful mission for their chief, and this thought caused him to recall the meeting of himself, Captain Lem, and John Littleton with Juan Cortina, at Helena, and the oath of vengeance the arch-outlaw had sworn against his friend, the ranchero. Therefore, as the gang of Greasers were headed toward the swell of the bend where the La Grange ranch was situated, and which they could easily reach by crossing the river before nightfall, the old scout became convinced that Cortina was about to strike the long-threatened blow upon Captain Lem.

The belief of Big Foot in this connection was strengthened, when he perceived that the band had spurred their horses at headlong rate toward the two youths, who had hastily mounted, and dashed toward the bottom-timber.

The giant scout was greatly concerned, and could not at first decide what move to make in aid of his friends. He felt sure that the Greasers had not observed him, and that neither had the two boys.

His hope was that Leon and Humpy would be able to distance their pursuers, as it was evident the mustangs of the Mexicans were somewhat fagged by an all day's march. Yet the slightest accident might place the lads in the power of the outlaws, when possibly both might be slain. What, then, was to be done?

Big Foot was not one to remain long undecided under the most trying and puzzling combination of circumstances, and he at once drove spurs; deciding to warn the vaqueros, and order them to drive the herds up the bend, and into the corrals, at once. Indeed, he thought it strange that the herders had lingered to such a late hour, having such a distance to drive; for the herds were within view, and appeared to be standing listlessly at the very entrance to the bend.

But the scout soon discovered something which appeared stranger, and in fact suspicious. This was, the two Mexicans, Pablo and Garcia, seated upon their horses, just clear of the bend, gazing up the river, and gesticulating energetically; seemingly intent upon attracting the attention of the band of Greasers afar up the stream.

Big Foot knew that the two herders could not have seen him.

He became convinced, also, by their actions, that they were not only well aware of the character of the band that was now approaching, but that they had been expecting them.

Pablo and Garcia had evidently not seen Leon and Humpy, as a swell of the timber shut them

out from their view. Hence the two traitors and spies believed that the band they were endeavoring to attract toward them were even then riding direct to the river, intending to cross the same, and hasten to the vicinity of the ranch by a nearer way; but placing themselves in a position more liable to discovery.

It was plain, at any rate that Captain Lem had been having in his employ two of the outlaws, and Big Foot resolved that both the treacherous villains should swing at a rope's end.

It had seemed strange to the scout that the band of Mexicans had given hot chase after Leon and the little ducky; for, how could the Greasers have known who these youths were?

The pursuit proved that the outlaws were not only aware of the location of the ranch, but that the bend was their objective point. Either this, or they had recognized Leon as the nephew of Captain La Grange.

In either case, they must have had their information from Pedro and Garcia.

It could not be otherwise.

Thus reasoned the giant scout, and his eyes flashed while his grip upon the breech of his rifle tightened.

He swept, with keen eyes, the vicinity of the herd, but could see no sign of Francisco.

Where was the remaining *vaquero*, the only one of the trio who had an honest face, and who had, in many ways hitherto, proved himself a most faithful servant to Captain Lem, and devoted to his employer's interests?

Could it be that his miscreant companions had murdered him, in order to have no trouble in securing the herds, and to have one enemy less at the ranch in case of a fight?

It did, indeed, appear so, and Wallace became more and more furious, more and more concerned for the safety of his friend's life and property; for, well the old scout knew that before help could be summoned from the nearest ranch, the yellow marauders would have ample time to do their worst, and put a safe distance between them and their plunder, and any who might pursue.

Big Foot was soon to be convinced that his conclusions had been but too accurate; for suddenly, when he was within less than half a mile of the entrance to the bend, he was perceived by Pablo and Garcia, who, with frantic haste, plied spurs and quirts, and sped, as though the fiends were in close pursuit, into the timber.

So great was the dread that all lawless men, white, red, and yellow, had of the giant scout, and so keen was he in ferreting out crime, that the two rascally Greasers, believing he had discovered their perfidy and the intended descent upon the ranch, seeing him galloping toward them, came to the conclusion that they were doomed. They, therefore, sought escape by flight, not daring to risk remaining, and braving the matter out by feigning ignorance or innocence.

On dashed Big foot, at terrific speed.

He had formed his plans, and he knew that he must use great haste in carrying the same out to a successful issue. He had no intention of pursuing the two cowardly wretches, feeling positive that he would eventually bring them to justice.

He sped directly toward the herd, and the animals darted for a few moments around in circles, huddling together, and then, with snorts of affright, started on a wild stampede toward the ranch and corrals. This was just what he had intended, and he yelled wildly, to hasten the mares onward by increasing their fright.

But, all at once, he drew rein; for, bound hand and foot, and lying prone on the sward, almost beneath the hoofs of his horse, lay the missing herder, Francisco!

With an ejaculation of surprise—although more relieved than anything else at finding the *vaquero* alive—Big Foot sprung from his beast, cut loose the unfortunate Mexican, and yelled, as he remounted:

"Run, Francisco! Run like the Old Boy to the ranch, and tell Senor La Grange I'm gone up ther drink arter Leon! Ther yaller skunks o' Cortina air on ther rampage.

"Yer needn't stop ter palaver. I know who hit war what tied yer up, an' I'll see that yer ties a rope 'round tha'r pesky necks 'fore soon. Dog-gone 'em! Ther cussed spies o' perdition!

"Skute, Francisco, an' kerral ther stock! Tell ther ole man ter keep a stiff upper lip, an' I'll run in on him afore ther gin'ral cussedness commences; thet is, if I doesn't git skuped in outen ther damp."

The old scout rattled off these words in great haste. Then, without waiting for a reply, he spurred at terrific speed up along the edge of



the timber, and toward the spot where Leon and Humpy had entered cover.

Francisco could not have spoken had he wished, for he had been gagged in a most painful manner; and, before he had recovered himself, Big Foot was beyond hearing distance. Without lingering, he sped as fast as was possible after the herd, which was then half-way to the swell of the bend, his own horse being in the stampede.

He knew that the ranch, the lives of his employer and Leon, and indeed those of Big Foot Wallace and himself, were in the greatest peril, for the words and manner of the scout had proved this, and he was not the man to magnify danger, or give false alarms. Consequently, Francisco made fast time; but, long before he gained the ranch, the animals had all been corraled by Captain Lem, and the latter was discovered by the herder, striding fast to meet him, and apparently much excited.

"What in thunder gave the beasts the stampede, Francisco? Where's Pablo and Garcia? Great snakes, I say, what's up? Have you seen Leon?"

"Big Foot Wallace stampede the horses, Senor Lemuello. Pablo and Garcia are spies and traitors. They tied me hand and foot, and gagged me, and I should not be here now but for Senor Wallace."

"He says bad Mexicans are up the river, and Garcia and Pablo knew they were coming. The big scout has galloped fast up the Leona. I have not seen Senor Leon since morning; then he rode up the river with Humpy. Big Foot has gone in search of him."

Captain Lem stood motionless, and with a look of anguish and the most dread apprehension upon his countenance. His whole form presently began to tremble when he recalled the oath of vengeance that had been sworn by Juan Cortina, and felt that the blow was now about to descend, and that it would crush out from his life all joy and pleasure, leaving it a barren waste.

He was too weak to reach the ranch without the support of Francisco.

The old soldier seemed prostrated in mind and body, but the faithful *vaquero* lost no time in making fast the doors and shutters, and then, loading all the fire-arms and placing them upon the table, with an ample supply of ammunition, he grasped a rifle and took a position for favorably watching the approaches to the corrals and the dwelling.

Night had by this time enveloped the earth with a dusky mantle, it being much darker within the bottom-timber than outside on the plains—indeed it was too dark to distinguish a human form unless one was near the same. The stars were thick and bright, however, and within the openings one could perceive objects quite plainly. Besides this, Francisco knew the moon would soon rise.

Whether this would benefit either party remained to be seen.

Finally, much to the herder's delight, Captain La Grange threw off the weight of despair that had ruled him, as much as was possible, and with set teeth and grim determination, clutched a rifle and strode toward the door, proceeding to cast aside the oaken bar. But Francisco grasped his arm and drew him to a loop-hole, bidding him, in a whisper, gaze outward.

The ranchero gave utterance to a groan of the deepest anguish, for he beheld Humpy crawling toward the dwelling, as if the utmost caution was necessary to insure his safety.

The little negro had accompanied Leon.

Where, then, could the idolized nephew of the captain be?

This questioning thought shot through the poor man's brain like a red-hot shaft of steel, and a heavy groan escaped him as he clutched at the log wall for support.

#### CHAPTER IX.

##### AGAINST FEARFUL ODDS.

THE great heart of the giant scout was filled with gravest anxiety in regard to the safety of the two lads, when he sped along the border of the timber in his daring and dangerous trip to ascertain the true state of affairs in connection with the pride of Captain Lem's heart and his own; to wit, little Leon.

And more than anxious was Big Foot when he caught the sound of firearms, and he decided that the youths had, for some rash and inexplicable reason, made halt at some seemingly favorable place which they had thought easy of defense, and that they were now, from that cover, defending themselves. Second thoughts, however, in considering this probability, made it seem unlikely. Indeed, he felt satisfied that

the youngsters could have evaded the bandits, or at least kept out of rifle range, had they so wished.

And absurd it was to suppose that Leon La Grange, who was intelligent beyond his years and who had never as yet encountered human foes, would run any needless risks. Besides, the old scout well knew that Leon would tax his horse to the utmost in an endeavor to reach the ranch as far ahead of the outlaws as was possible, in order to warn his uncle and have everything secure to stand or repel an assault.

These most natural reasonings plunged Big Foot into a very perplexed state of mind in regard to the cause of the firing. Most certainly the bandits were not within rifle range of the youths when he had first perceived them, and judging from the condition he had believed the animals of the Greasers to be in, he did not deem it possible that they could have lessened the distance between them and the lads.

It was true that he had no means of knowing in what condition the ponies of Leon and Humpy were, but it was not reasonable to suppose that the boys had run them to any extent—certainly not throughout the day.

There was only one way to account for their having halted or having been forced to take an advantageous position and there defend themselves, and that was that one of the ponies might have met with an accident. This was the decision arrived at by the old scout, but in spite of it, he remained just as much concerned as before.

Not for a moment did he dream that the bandits had met other enemies than the two helpless youths, as the Bend Ranch was the last on that border, there being not another within twenty miles, and no cattle on that range whatever, except within the bend. Consequently, there would be no occasion for a body of cow-hunters to be in that locality; and as for mustangers, it was not the right season of the year.

There was mystery and death ahead, however. Of this Big Foot was satisfied.

And from the fact that Leon and Humpy were probably in some manner concerned in it, he spared not his faithful steed, which fairly flew over the ground as if life and death depended upon a moment's time, as, indeed, he felt, they probably did.

Darker grew the shadows, and before Big Foot reached the vicinity of the spot where he knew that the youths must have entered the timber, the shades of night had fallen.

The noted scout was not one to approach the point of probable conflict without due caution. Such had been his haste that he had not once made halt to listen. Had he done so he might have caught the sound of the war-whoops of the Comanches, which, had he heard them, would have at once explained to him the cause of the firing. Before coming too near he guided his horse into the timber a few yards and listened intently.

All was still.

The victorious whoops of the Indians had ceased, and they were skulking after signs of their foes in silence, having by that time slain and scalped the trio of Mexicans who had sprung from their horses into the river and striven to escape by swimming down-stream.

But as the old scout was now impatiently about to urge his horse onward once more, his practiced ears caught a sound of the moving of the branches and the dull, but regular, tramp of a horse along one of the paths that led from the river. Reaching cover as soon as possible, and as near the unknown equestrian as he could with safety, Big Foot again halted and strained his senses to the utmost. He knew that the horse which approached was controlled and ridden, and he was also able to decide very closely the point at which the horseman would emerge from the timber.

But the latter did not ride forth from the screen of bush and branch, as Wallace had expected he would.

Just the opposite, for he halted within a few yards of the hiding-place of the scout and remained still and silent.

Big Foot was more than puzzled this time. He was indignant and furious. His anxiety was too strong and torturing to permit him to remain inactive while the fate of Leon La Grange was in doubt.

Yet the old scout was at a loss what move to make.

Soon he became desperate and drew his revolver, determined to spur forward and drive the stranger at the muzzle of the weapon out into clear ground. Just as he had thus decided, however, he detected the approach of a number of night-riders, who were just keeping within the

shades of the timber, thus proving that they feared to ride on the open plain.

The mystery had deepened.

Of whom were they afraid?

Certainly not of the two boys from the ranch. These must be the Mexicans, whom he had seen.

But, why were they thus cautious? Why were they riding through the thorny thickets?

This was strange to the scout.

Stranger events were, however, soon to happen.

By the sounds, there must be about a dozen of the Greasers thus approaching, and Big Foot was directly in their path, should they keep on in the course in which they were traveling. Yet he felt no fear for his personal safety.

He was sure, too, that the single horseman, who had ridden up from the river, belonged with the band that were nearing him, and that he would join them.

He was soon to know that he was correct in this.

When the party reached a point near where the lurker was, the latter emerged suddenly from his covert, as has been recorded, and confronted the astonished Greasers.

Big Foot was thunderstruck as well.

He recognized Bluff Bill the instant he heard the villain's voice!

He was still more astounded when he beheld little Leon, senseless, as was evident, and held in the arms of his dastard uncle, a captive!

At once he realized the object of the raid.

It had been organized for the purpose of taking captive Leon and his uncle, through the influence and money of Bluff Bill, who, as Big Foot then began to feel assured, must be connected with the infamous outlaw, Cortina.

No doubt the captives were to be taken to Mexico, and then the bandit chief would fulfill his vow of vengeance; and, when both were thus removed, Bluff Bill would step into the fortunes of both. All was now plain. It was almost incredible that any man could be so depraved and merciless, but the proofs were before the old scout.

Neither could he doubt that the ranch was to be attacked, and the stock stolen for the benefit of the bandits.

The words of Bill La Grange, which were plainly audible to Big Foot, proved that the band had encountered hostile Indians. There was, then, danger on both sides. But, from the first moment that the giant scout beheld the captive and unconscious youth, he had vowed mentally that he would rescue him, or at least make the attempt, even were he slain in doing so. And this, as we have seen, he accomplished.

Had he so willed it he might—and, were it not for jeopardizing the life of Leon, he would—have "cleaned out" the yellow outlaws to a man, for no half-score of Mexicans, and especially demoralized and startled as they were, could have stood the charge of that powerful man, incensed and nerved as he was by the scene, and by the words of the miscreant Bluff Bill.

As it was, Big Foot could have put an end to the criminal career of the latter, and then have escaped as readily as he did, but he believed Bill La Grange was destined for the gallows, and that he richly merited an ignominious death.

The bullets whistled thick around the scout as he dashed toward the river, and into the shades. Before going far, however, he recalled the words of Bluff Bill in regard to their having been attacked by Indians. Then, too, he remembered that not more than half of the band he had seen on the plain had been present at the meeting with their leader.

From this Big Foot concluded that doubtless the missing ones had been slain in the fight. Then it occurred to him that he was still in a position of danger. Not that he thought of such a thing in connection with himself, but he was anxious to convey little Leon to the ranch, and thus relieve the mind of Captain Lem, who would be nearly insane when Francisco reached the corrals with intelligence of what had happened.

But, as the Mexicans had come from up the stream, which had been the scene of the fight with the Comanches, it was reasonable to suppose that the latter would be on their trail, and not near the point at which he was intending to cross the river.

It would have been foolish to have returned to the bend the same way in which he had come, as in that case the Greasers might have gotten him foul. Besides, it was much nearer to ford at once, and make a bee-line over the plain to the outer swell of the bend.



Not only did these reasons influence the old scout, but he wished to reach the water without delay, in order that he might bathe Leon's head, and, when the boy had revived, gain from him all the information that he might have to give.

Big Foot was no little concerned, as well, in regard to the fate of Humpy, fearing that the poor deformed negro lad had been killed. He therefore hastened at once to the bank of the river, into which he urged his horse and forded, confident that the opposite side was sure and safe.

He then lowered Leon to the ground, dismounted, and taking the youth in his arms, stepped to the edge of the water and began casting the cool liquid over the little fellow's face and head.

So solicitous, concerned, and pained was the great-hearted Wallace, when gazing upon the pallid features of Leon La Grange, that he was less on the alert, less watchful than usual. This was soon proven, when several Comanche braves came bounding from the undergrowth upon him before he could relinquish his hold upon little Leon and draw a weapon.

The scout was, although a giant in size and strength, overpowered and bound, as was Leon. Then the bottom-timber resounded with whoops of victory and triumph again and again; for the savages had in their power their most dreaded enemy, the skillful and noted scout, Big Foot Wallace!

## CHAPTER X.

### BRINGING IN THE NEWS.

HUMPY the Hunchback lay senseless and bleeding in the bed of the wash-out, where he had been felled from his horse by the murderous blow of Bluff Bill. For a long time, indeed, he appeared to have been killed, for not a groan escaped him, and his deformed body lay still and silent as a corpse.

The beautiful mustang of little Leon had started in a fright up the gully, and into the timber; but the pony of Humpy had galloped down the wash-out to the river, where it stood, quivering in every limb, gazing out over the waters; for through the river was the only escape, except by returning to the spot where the animal had been so terrified, as the sides of the immense ditch were steep and high—in fact, insurmountable.

Eventually, however, the little negro rolled from side to side, and sighed heavily.

Then he arose to a sitting posture, and, with wildly-staring eyes, gazed up and down the grim and silent, and now fast-darkening natural excavation. It would have been evident to any observer that Humpy was in a dazed state, and unable to comprehend his condition. He could not even recall the near past. But he remained not long thus.

Like a flash of light, the boy again beheld the scene he had last witnessed.

He saw the hideous face of the strange horseman, who, with uplifted revolver, urged his steed upon him.

The black boy knew that he had received a terrible blow, and he felt confident that his young master had come to harm through the same source.

Who their assailant was, Humpy had no idea. One thing only, had been most plainly proved. He was a murderous and dangerous enemy.

Where, now, was Leon?

Who was the ruffian, in color and dress like a Mexican, but whose features were American? And where were the horses?

Why, indeed, had he been stricken at all?

He had no money or valuables.

But then, neither had Leon.

Was this man, who had assaulted him, the leader of the Greaser band that had chased him and his young master? And why had they pursued two boys, from whom they could expect no booty, except perhaps their arms and the ponies?

Such were the thoughts of the poor little bewildered dwarf.

Then he sprang to his feet, and, knowing the river was near, staggered down the wash-out, where, to his great joy he discovered his mustang. The animal recognized its master, and trotted to his side as if rejoiced to see him. The boy patted the beast's muzzle, and then stooping, bathed his bruised head, and washed the blood from his face.

Humpy then braced himself, and resolved to seek his young master.

Although small and deformed, the black boy was of great strength, and as quick of movement as a monkey. He found his knife and revolver in his belt, undisturbed. This surprised him for it showed clearly that plunder had not

been the motive of the ruffianly stranger. Had that been so, his horse and arms would have been taken.

Every moment increased the fearful anxiety and concern of the poor lad; and, when he reflected that his "Mars' Leon" might be a captive to that cowardly miscreant and might even then be harshly treated by him, the young negro was nearly frantic with grief and rage. Had the Comanches seen him at that moment, they might well be seized with superstitious terror.

It was when rendered thus despairing and furious regarding Leon, and uncertain as to what way he had best turn in search of his young master, that Humpy beheld, up the river, several Indians upon their plunging steeds. These were speeding along the edge of the high bank on the opposite side of the stream shooting their arrows downward into the water.

There, to the surprise and exultation of the black boy, he saw three of the Mexicans, who had been the prime cause of the misfortunes of Leon and himself; and he witnessed, without much pity, the slaying of the worthless trio.

Humpy had learned much of the habits, manners, and customs of the savages, and knew that, from the fact that the Comanches did not give utterance to victorious whoops, they must be intending to search for other victims, whom they were desirous not to alarm. Judging thus, he reasoned, that should Leon fall into their hands, he would be lost indeed; and, if he should be even then in the power of the Mexicans—as he had every reason to believe—he was liable to be taken by the reds, and tortured to death!

The tragic scene he had witnessed caused the dwarf to decide that the Indians, being on the opposite side of the stream, the bandits must be on the same side with himself; therefore he must proceed up the wash-out and carefully inspect the timber.

Having come to this conclusion, Humpy sprang nimbly into his saddle, and rode rapidly up the excavation until he reached its terminus, which was in the midst of the bottom-timber. Then, realizing that he would be in great danger, besides working at a disadvantage in his search for Leon, by pursuing his course mounted, he alighted, secured his steed to a limb, and darted toward the open south plain. There he sought to assure himself that the outlaw Mexicans were not speeding away on the back trail with their captive.

But, just before reaching the border of the timber, the boy halted, for he detected the approach of horsemen. These, he felt assured, must be the remnant of the band, who had been pursuing himself and his young master.

It was then sufficiently light in the shades, for Humpy to decide that he had been correct in his conclusions; for the Greasers passed sufficiently near his hiding-place for him to make out their character and identity. He was, however, greatly disappointed; for he could see nothing of little Leon, as he had confidently expected. He was all the more sure that the miscreant who had knocked him from his horse was not with those who rode past him.

Humpy glided softly along after these silent horsemen, positive that he would soon discover some proofs of the fate, or whereabouts, of the one he sought. On he went, close following the band, and was, in a very short time, greatly surprised by hearing a crashing among the bushes, followed by the voice of a man addressing the Mexicans, who had at once halted.

Drawing nearer, Humpy recognized the form and face of the man who had assailed him.

It was he who now confronted the band, and he was evidently their leader.

In his arm, and supported across the horn of the saddle, was little Leon!

Humpy's young master showed no signs of life. His face was streaked with blood, and, where not thus stained, was pale as death.

The little negro fairly trembled with the intensity of his passions.

But the words spoken by Bluff Bill chained him to the spot.

These proved to the black boy that the villain had an object in capturing Leon; and, when he spoke also of capturing "the old man," Humpy knew that Captain Leon was meant.

He was paralyzed.

But then came the most startling move of all.

This was the sudden appearance of Big Foot Wallace, who dashed out from the thicket, and, in a moment's time, shot two of the band dead, felled their leader to the ground, and sped away, bearing Leon La Grange in his arms!

The little ducky's joy and exultation knew no bounds. He recognized the giant scout, who had, in the nick of time, taken a hand in the tragic doings of the evening.

Humpy, also, now knew that the leader of the Greaser outlaws was a Texan in disguise. His voice had betrayed the fact.

But why did this miscreant hold such enmity toward the captain and Leon?

The little fellow lost no time, but hastened on after Big Foot. He felt that he must overtake him as soon as possible, for the scout was hurrying toward the river—toward greater dangers still—and must be ignorant of what there awaited him.

Big Foot Wallace had only arrived at the bend that evening, and had come in quest of Leon, after leaving Francisco, and knew nothing indeed in regard to the near presence of the Comanches; unless he had been able to judge, by the words let fall by Bluff Bill, that the outlaws had been engaged in a fight with the red-men near at hand.

The disappointment and concern of poor little Humpy may be imagined, when, upon running as fast as was in his power after getting a safe distance from the Mexicans, he reached the vicinity of the river, and failed to see anything of the scout; and that, although he had heard the sound made by Big Foot's horse, but a minute previous.

But, hesitating not, he proceeded down the decline to the river-bank, where he parted the bushes, and gazed over the stream. Then a sigh of relief escaped him, as he perceived the scout bathing the head of little Leon.

This tableau chained the attention of the black boy for a moment. The next, his emotions of joy and gratitude were destined to be transformed. His fury and anguish became more intense and poignant than ever; for, while he gazed, he beheld, to his great horror, a number of hideously painted braves hurl themselves upon Big Foot Wallace, and, notwithstanding the almost superhuman struggles of the giant scout, bind him hand and foot!

Frozen to the spot, Humpy's very heart was torn and convulsed, when he saw his young master, who had been recovering under the ministrations of the old scout, now bound and roughly hurled beside his recent rescuer. Then the red warriors stood erect, and gazed over the dark waters, as if they expected more victims.

This caused the negro youth to crouch still further back into the shades; but not in fear, for all fear was now banished from his mind. It had given place to a mad and consuming rage and hatred, which had transformed him into an avenging fury.

Yet, the black boy felt that he must act with caution. Much, he knew, depended upon his skill and exertions, even the life of Captain Lem, for it was almost certain that the outlaws would now hasten to the ranch, which would be at their mercy. The Indians, he felt positive, knew nothing of its location; otherwise they would have gone direct to the bend.

It appeared to Humpy that, as he could not hope to rescue the old scout and Leon, or indeed aid them in any way, until the Comanches had given up their search for the Mexicans and gone into camp, duty led him back to the Bend Ranch, to warn his master of the approach of the outlaws, and give him all the particulars he could in regard to both red and yellow marauders.

They could then act together toward the rescue of Leon and Big Foot.

Thus decided, the deformed lad acted in accordance. He made his way forthwith to the point at which he had left his horse. Then, leading the animal, with the greatest care, below the spot where the Indians were watching their captives, he mounted, and swam the pony across the river.

Once upon the south side of the Rio Leona, and clear of the timber, Humpy rode at his utmost speed, fairly flying over the trail to the swell of the bend. There, fording again, he found himself near the ranch.

Securing the pony to a tree, he proceeded cautiously on foot, for he thought possibly the bandits had already reached the vicinity and might spring upon him at any moment. Soon, however, he saw that the animals were all inside the corrals; and when he saw further that shutters and doors of the dwelling were secured, he knew that all was well so far, and that the scout had, by some means, warned Captain Lem.

Humpy continued to crawl cautiously toward the dwelling until quite near, when he arose and bounded forward, just as the door was thrown open by Francisco.

The next moment Captain La Grange had clutched him, crying out:

"Where is Leon? Where is my boy? Speak, Humpy, or I'll shake the life out of you!"



## CHAPTER XI.

## THREE AGAINST A MULTITUDE.

BARELY had the door of the log-dwelling been slammed and barred after the entrance of Humpy—indeed, before the boy found breath to reply to the hurried questions of his master—when the occupants of the cabin were terribly startled by a crashing volley of *escopetas* against the front walls, rattling the very door through which the little darky had entered but a moment previous.

"Fer de Lor's sake, Mars' Lem, don't yer stop hyer no mo'! Dar's a heap o' yaller debils arter we-uns, an' de Injuns am up de ribber, too. Dey done got Mars' Leon an' Big Foot."

"Come on! Le's run out de back do' quick, er we-uns 'll get kerraled hyer, an' roasted alive!"

As Humpy thus spoke, he tugged at the clothing of the old ranchero, striving to drag him to the rear door.

Francisco heard every word of this, and knew that to fly when the way was evidently still open, before the outlaws closed about the dwelling, would be the only chance of saving their lives; besides, their services were needed in rescuing Leon and the old scout. He, therefore, thrust out his revolver through the loop-hole and quickly fired the whole six shots here and there, as he saw the Greasers bounding from tree to tree, and spreading out on either side in an evident attempt to surround the dwelling.

He had the satisfaction of hearing two or three yells of agony, and believing he had killed, or at least wounded, Pablo, whom with Garcia he had recognized among the bandits. He then rushed to the table, secured all the weapons and passing a rifle to Captain Lem and the little darky, also a pair of loaded revolvers to each, he cried out:

"Yes, Senor Lem, we must fly, and quickly, or we are lost! The rear of the *casa* is free and the back door shuts with a spring."

"Come! We will make the dash, and woe to them who bar our way. Humpy is right. He has saved us by coming as he did. Those two traitors are with the miscreants, Senor Lem, and they seek your life."

"But follow Francisco and Humpy! We will spill our best blood in your defense. Come! Time is worth more than ranches and horses. *Vamonos!*"

Captain La Grange braced himself as much as was possible under the agony and bewilderment, the overwhelming misfortune that seemed to be impending. The words of his servants were such as to influence him strongly, or he might have stood his ground and died in defending his home and property. But to know Leon, his pride and hope, was a captive to Comanches—this was terrible! It was worse even than being in the power of the Mexican outlaws.

The captain had entertained no idea of the possibility of other enemies than the bandits being in the neighborhood, consequently the sad, indeed, awful news at first overpowered him, rendering him hopeless and despairing. But the words of the faithful *vaquero* changed his emotion somewhat and made him more hopeful.

The avalanche of misery that had so suddenly come upon him, he now began calmly to realize. The fates appeared to be bent upon his entire ruin. Not only were he and his adopted son doomed, but those who were true to him—Wallace, Francisco, and little Humpy—as well.

The old soldier became desperate. His weakness vanished. He seized the arms proffered by the faithful herder, straightened himself erect, his eyes blazing and his features drawn, and called out, in a hoarse and unnatural voice:

"Lead on, boys! I'm all straight now. Curse them, red and yellow! We'll clean them out, and rescue Leon and Big Foot, or give our last kick! Let the ranch go to thunder. My boy's life is worth a dozen ranches."

"Git, is the word! Up-creek we go after Leon and Wallace. Then the Greaser fiends had better skip lively, if they linger till we return. Git, I say, and keep your peepers peeled!"

Francisco opened the door, and the daring three passed out, shutting it after them. The snap of the spring sounded to prove that all was secure. Then all dropped to the earth and crawled toward the nearest timber, taking advantage of every bush and prostrate log. Soon they reached a safe covert, from which, as they lingered a moment, they could detect here and there men bounding from one tree-trunk to another, and then, when the dwelling had been surrounded, two of the outlaws stationed, thus sheltered, between the hiding-place of our friends and the house.

These men were exposed to their fire, but the

trio had no intention of shooting in that way, and thus betraying the fact that the building had been vacated. They wished the bandits to believe them inside, as long as it was possible.

It appeared that they had made their escape in the nick of time—thanks to the advice of the little hunchback.

Could they but effect the release of Leon and the scout, and escape back to the ranch without being close followed by the Comanches, there would perhaps be a chance to defeat the Mexicans: preventing the latter from driving away the cattle and horses. But they lingered scarce a moment, for their anxiety in regard to Wallace and Leon was too intense to allow them to waste time.

Making a wide detour, they reached the rear gate of the horse corral unobserved by the yellow miscreants; when Francisco quickly saddled a horse for Captain Lem, and caught his own animal, which was already equipped. Humpy, also, secured a fresh mount.

Proceeding to the point where the negro boy had left his pony, the equipments of which were transferred to the other horse, all spurred through the timber, forded the river, passed the trees on the opposite side, and then, keeping along the dark margin of the bottom-timber, spurred at headlong speed on to the rescue of their friends.

As they thus rode side by side, Humpy related all that had occurred to him and Leon; thus greatly increasing the pain and anxiety of Captain La Grange.

They had had no thought of danger from the Indians, but they now saw that only by a miracle could the ranch and stock, and even their own lives, be preserved from the hordes of merciless red and yellow miscreants. They knew that at any moment, the Comanches might torture the two captives; if, indeed, they had not already done so.

This thought made them drive spurs without mercy, their speed being really terrific and dangerous in that dim light; as gully, root, or stone might at any time cause disaster, if not death. Yet they strove to increase, instead of check, their furious gallop.

At length they arrived within a half-mile of the point where Humpy had witnessed the capture of Big Foot and Leon; when it was deemed imprudent for them to proceed further, except within the dense shades. And, even within the bottom-timber, they could not hope to approach very near the Indians when mounted, as their presence would be betrayed to any lurking guard, by the sounds which the animals would necessarily make.

After a brief consultation, they continued on, their senses strained to the greatest tension, expecting to hear savage whoops at any moment. But all was silent—silent as death—except when now and then, a panther shriek, yelp of wolf, or hoot of owl, rendered it even more impressive. All this was torturing. Much rather would they have heard the yells and whoops of the savages, as then they would have known the exact location of their red foes.

Finally, our friends reached a point as near the scene of the capture as was deemed advisable, when they dismounted, secured their horses where they could easily find them again, and continued their journey on foot; leaving their rifles behind, as those weapons would greatly impede their progress through the thicket.

Humpy, though but a deformed slave, was the adviser and controller of these movements; and Captain Lem manifested more regard for the black youth than he had ever shown to one of his servants, for the boy had been with Leon, had witnessed the second capture, and had acted in the most fearless and sensible way throughout the whole of the startling scenes of that eventful evening.

Of this, both the captain and Francisco were assured; and they fully realized that they would be almost helpless, as far as rescuing Leon and the scout was concerned, but for little Humpy.

When they came near the scene of the capture, all crawled silently forward, until Humpy pointed out the precise spot where their two friends had been cast by the Comanches after being securely bound. Just a few moments previous to this, the moon arose above the eastern horizon, and, being full at the time, brightly illumined the earth. The consequence was, that they had a view of the small clear space; but, there were neither Indians nor captives to be seen, and silence ruled the timber around them.

For some moments they hardly breathed, as their faces were pressed free from the foliage.

And, what strong contrasts did those faces present each to the other!

Representatives of three races of mankind, their skins and their features strikingly opposite, yet all ruled by a common controlling anxiety—all having the same end in view, and each eager and anxious to risk life in the accomplishment of that aim—the rescue of Big Foot Wallace and little Leon.

All knew that the Indians hated and greatly feared the giant scout, and that they would be most exultant at having captured him; and, fearing that he might escape their vengeance, as he had more than once done before, they would undoubtedly make sure of him by torturing him at once.

And then, Leon would be included in the horrible sacrifice!

This knowledge burned in the brain of the old ranchero, and being forced also upon Francisco and Humpy, caused all three the utmost mental agony. Captain La Grange was almost uncontrollable. His great desire was to rush wildly through the timber, and end the torturing suspense that was eating at his very soul.

But at that instant the sound of a volley of carbines floated up from the direction of the ranch.

All started nervously.

This was followed by a full minute of impressive silence, when, suddenly all three, as if having received a powerful shock from an electric battery, sprung to their feet in open-mouthed wonder, their features imprinted with horror and apprehension.

What had caused this sudden change?

It was a long-drawn wail of agony, that ended in a shriek of dread despair. It could have proceeded, as the hearers well knew, from but one; and he must be suffering the extreme of physical and mental agony.

"The red devils have begun to torture!" yelled Captain Lem, dashing through the thickets, and up the river-bank. "Heaven preserve my poor boy, my poor boy Leon!"

"Brace up, Leon!" he cried, "the old man is coming, and he'll save you, or die trying!"

Neither Francisco nor Humpy strove to detain their master. It would have been useless. They both clutched their revolvers, and sprung off, close upon his track.

The little darky, by a herculean effort, gained the lead, taking advantage of the old ranchero's having stumbled and fallen into a gully. He cried out:

"Come on, Mars' Lem! Humpy reckons he kin find de red hellyuns' camp, but we-uns is gwine to be gobbled, sho' an' sartain. Golly, what's de differ? We kin die tryin' ter resky Mars' Leon an' de big scout."

"*Carajo!*" was the single ejaculation that came hissing from the lips of the *vaquero*, as he jerked knife and pistol, and rushed frantically onward.

Right into the jaws of death the intrepid trio believed themselves to be flying, but they hesitated not an instant.

There was not, they believed, one chance in a thousand for them to save the victims, or even to escape with their own lives.

Not the slightest doubt had they that the shriek they had heard, and which tore through their brains and hearts, had been wrung by the torture from Leon La Grange!

## CHAPTER XII.

## THE COMANCHES AND THEIR CAPTIVES.

BIG FOOT WALLACE had never, perhaps, had quite so much anxiety on his mind as at the time he rescued little Leon from his infamous uncle, Bluff Bill. Under the circumstances, he had more than his share of apprehension before hearing the words of the dastard, which revealed the presence of Indians on the Rio Leona.

There were but two men at the ranch, the captain himself and Francisco; and, even did Leon recover, there would be but four. On the other hand, the outlaws were sufficient in number to run off the cattle and horses.

But, when the giant scout understood, from the words of Bluff Bill, that Indians were near also, and that they had been in conflict with the Greasers, he was on the verge of despair, for he was confident that the red trailers would, on the morrow, discover "sign," which would lead them to the bend. Taken altogether, Big Foot felt that he and Captain Lem had more on their shoulders than they could well bear.

The war-party was probably a strong one, and everything pointed to disaster and death.

All that they could do was to fly, and leave the ranch and stock to the marauders, hoping that the reds would annihilate the Greasers, and torture the villainous brother of Captain La Grange, who had caused all this.



The mind of the noted scout was in a whirl. He hardly knew that he held little Leon in his arms for some time after he had escaped with him from the outlaws. This perplexity made the scout less cautious, far less watchful and cunning than he would have been in less puzzling and apprehensive situations. Had this not been the case he would not have fallen into the hands of the Comanches.

"However, it was perfectly natural and reasonable for him to decide that the Indians were following the trail of the outlaw Mexicans, or else had remained at the scene of the conflict, some distance up the river.

Be that as it may, there surely was not a more dumfounded man on earth, or a more maddened and self-condemning one, than the giant scout, when the half-dozen Comanche braves sprung upon him. He very nearly escaped them, hurling the savages right and left in his great strength and frantic rage; but a lasso encircled his body, binding his arms to his side, and this decided the unequal struggle.

Even after being helplessly bound, Big Foot felt more anxiety for poor Leon, and also for Captain Lem, than he did for himself.

Many a time had he been in just as desperate a position, and had escaped from both red and yellow-skinned captors through the assistance of one or more of his pard's. But these were now, Heaven only knew where!

There was but little chance for escape this time.

At that moment the boy recovered consciousness.

He recognized his companion in captivity.

"Big Foot Wallace," he said faintly.

Then, perceiving their condition, he asked:

"Have you lost your liberty on my account? What does this mean? I was taken by a Texan disguised as a Mexican, but these are Indians. My poor uncle! They will kill him, too!

"Speak to me, Wallace, or I shall go mad! Give me some hope—some light in this awful darkness."

"Don't yer talk thet-a-way, leetle pard, fer ther ole man hev gut enough onter his brain ter bu'st hit! Things air ormighty mixed an' billyus, but thar's no use n cryin' over it. Yer war tuck by yer own uncle—yer dad's brother—an or'nary miser'ble cuss what mixes wi' Greaser scum; but I reskied yer from him. Howsomdever, I wish't I'd left yer with him, 'stid o' gittin' yer inter this hyer torterin' lay-out.

"I 'roved et ther bend jest es yeou an' Humpy war jumpin' yer critters ter skute from ther batch o' Greasers. I knowed they war crooked, an' I struck fer ther herd, whar I found Pablo an' Garcia war in cahoots wi' yer cuss of an uncle, fer they stompeded when they see'd me, arter hev'n' tied Francisco.

"I cut him loose an' started him ter ther ranch wi' ther critters, fer ter tell Cap'n Lem what war up. Then I come a-b'ilin' this-a-way, fer ter resky yer if so be yer was tuck.

"I hain't see'd Humpy et all. Reckon ther reds hes split his cabase. Ef they hain't, he mought try some trick ter git we-uns outen our scrape. He's ther only one what we-uns kin look ter fer help, fer yer uncle Lem an' Francisco hev gut tha'r han's full, an' more too, at ther ranch.

"Leetle pard, this air billyus, but we-uns must grin an' b'ar it. I allers 'spected fer ter die slow an' hard, wi' some squirmen' in ther biz; an' I reckon hit's 'bout time fer ther last kick, though I doesn't say die ontill my breath 'gins ter slip away from me."

"How came you to be captured, Big Foot?"

"'Count o' bein' a dang'd fool fer a few flectin' periuds, my head bein' on ther big buzz, thinkin' o' this hyer muddled-up mess 'long o' Greasers an' reds runnin' in on us, an' thar bein' but four humans ter buck ag'in' 'em. I didn't onc't think o' ther reds bein' this-a-way, an' I war ormighty skeered, thinkin' yer he'd had got a knock thet mought kill yer, er stop yer squar' thinkin' in ther futur."

"But Big Foot ain't dead yet, not much. Look out thar, yer greasy, mangy son o' a kiote, er I'll bu'st ther buffler-strings an' skin yer head with my finger-nails!"

This last was said in threatening fury as one of the Indians gave him a kick.

The fierce expression and furiously shot-out words caused the Comanche to step back quickly, for the giant scout strained at his bonds, his muscles gathering in big knots.

It seemed as though the Indian feared him, although he was fast bound, and the reds all directed their attention to the captives, having previously been scrutinizing the opposite bank.

"Heap big warrior!" growled the brave who had kicked Wallace. "Talk heap, fight heap,

take heap scalps. Big Foot, great chief; must die at torture-stake!"

"Dog-gone yer dirty, smoky skins! Ye're kerrect! I've skinned a power o' Comanche heads, an' I'll skin more. Yer hain't torter'd me yit, an' yer can't, fer ther Great Spirit perfects me. Fire can't burn me, knives break ag'in' my bones, an' arrers skute past me without scratchin' my skin.

"Take me ter yer village, an' I'll gi'n yer a circus. Wa-al, yeou bet I will. Pick out es many braves es thar bees moons in ther year, tie one han' ahind me, an' gi'n me a knife in t'other. Then let 'em all at me ter onc't. Ef I doesn't skin tha'r heads an' feed ther dogs wi' ther hull batch, yer kin chuck me out on the perrarer fer wolf lunch.

"Thet's me every time, yer knock-kneed, shamble-shanked, paint-daubed, cowardly, sneak-in' sculpers! Dang yer, when I flip up an' go on ther long, dark trail, ther rivers'll run dry an' ther sun'll quit a-risin', an' don't yer dismember hit!"

Both the old scout and Leon watched the Indians keenly while the former was speaking. They both knew that the brave who had spoken in broken English understood him.

This was proved by the same red-skin speaking at length with his fellow-braves, all of whom glanced from time to time with no little anxiety at their giant captive.

After a short deliberation, two of the savages strode away, soon returning with two mustangs, when they lifted the scout, but not without difficulty, upon one of the animals, and Leon upon the other.

Both captives noticed that they were handled with care and respect.

"Reckon I slung gab what'll sot 'em a-thinkin'. Fac' air, they're thinkin' a heap over hit now. I'm bettin' they won't tortur' us till they gits ter ther village. Thar'll be some show fer us yit. Keep a stiff upper lip, leetle pard!"

"I am only thinking of my uncle," replied the youth.

"Hit's a long time before mornin', Leon, an' yer can't count dead sure on what mought happen 'twixt this an' then."

The mustangs were led along a path singly, and Leon and Big Foot had no further opportunity to converse. Quite a distance was traversed, when they entered an open, which was surrounded by trees and dense undergrowth.

In the center were several fires, at which cooking was going on.

Mustangs were grazing on the outer portion of the plain.

No yells or whoops of exultation were given as the captives were brought in. Nothing was heard but low, guttural conversation, and pointing at them, with much of sign language.

From this, the scout reasoned that their capture had previously been reported, and the cause of their abstaining from the customary noise on such occasions was that they hoped yet to secure the residue of the band of Mexicans. He also felt assured that a number of the war-party were absent, seeking the outlaws.

The mustangs were led to the western side of the camp, and the captives taken from their backs. As they were placed on the ground, heavy groans drew their attention, and turning their eyes they saw two Mexicans. These were the survivors of the fight between the outlaws and the Indians.

The corpses of two braves, and three that had been wounded, were also to be seen, and Big Foot then knew that there would be a torture scene.

The warriors soon satisfied their hunger, and then collected in a group. In five minutes more, the two ill-starred bandits were hanging, head downward; being thus suspended by the ankles between two saplings, the bent tops of which pulled in opposite directions.

Around this scene of excruciating torture, the savages danced in silent glee.

Leon shivered with horror.

The old scout was greatly relieved, however, and explained to the boy, the reason why.

This torture of the outlaws might be the salvation of the other captives.

But while the savage dance was going on, a mountain Apache galloped into the open, and gave several rapid signs, pointing down the river as he did so.

Too well did Big Foot know the meaning of those signs, but he dared not explain them to Leon. They meant that the ranch was being attacked by the Greasers, led by Bluff Bill!

The tortured captives were forgotten. The dance quickly ceased. All was bustle in the encampment. The braves speedily equipped their mustangs, armed themselves, and, leaving a

guard of half-a-dozen warriors, galloped madly from the open.

It was plain to the old scout that the war-party had gone to attack both the Mexicans and the ranch. But Leon was puzzled. He had, however, no inclination to talk, and Wallace strove, when not observed, to break free, but the attempt was useless.

After the departure of the main portion of the war-party, the six braves, who had been left to guard the camp and captives, resolved to have their dance before the tortured ones were dead; and they at once began; no notice being paid to the bound captives, who were considered secure from escape.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### A SMALL SURPRISE PARTY.

HAD Captain La Grange, Francisco, and Humpy delayed darting into the timber for five minutes more, they would have seen the greater part of the Comanche war-party speeding from the dark shades up the stream westward, and galloping wildly toward the north, and in the direction of Bend Ranch.

But, had this delay been made, they would doubtless have been discovered by the Indians.

We left the captain, with his two followers, tearing frantically through the undergrowth toward the point from which had sounded that soul-harrowing shriek which they all felt confident must have proceeded from poor Leon. They had good grounds for thus deciding, for they knew that the boy and Big Foot were in the power of the Comanches, and they had no knowledge of any other captives.

Besides this, they were aware that the savages greatly feared the giant scout, that several times he had been captured by them, only that he might as often escape, and that in a most marvelous manner. They would, therefore, naturally put Big Foot to the torture at once—thus to make sure of his death—and Leon would suffer with him.

Hence their haste through the thorny thickets, tearing their clothing and their flesh, but they felt not the wounds. On they rushed, hoping to reach the scene of torture in time to rescue the youth before life was extinct.

The old rancho was incapable of reflection, but Francisco and the dwarf well knew that they would be only casting themselves into the hands of the Indians, without in the least benefiting the captives. Both felt that the only way to be of service would be to study the position of the doomed ones, and to practice strategy.

Allowing Captain Lem to get a short distance in advance—Francisco and Humpy both seeming actuated by the same reasonings—the pair held a hasty consultation, in which they formed their plan of action. And very soon they were called upon to put it in operation.

Hastening to close up with the captain, who was by that time nearly exhausted, they had not gone more than twenty yards, when again shot out that soul-racking cry; when, looking upward, they perceived a flash of fire glowing upon the foliage of the trees in their front, and lighting up the space between the lower limbs of the huge trees and the undergrowth.

As the shriek tore through the air, the old rancho cried out:

"Oh, Heaven help me! Help me to save my boy!"

As he thus spoke, he put his hand to his heart, and staggered like a drunken man.

He then halted, and began rubbing his eyes, as if to convince himself that he was in reality awake. He trembled violently, and sunk to the ground.

At a gesture from Humpy, Francisco rapidly bound his master, hand and foot, and thrust a kerchief into his mouth.

Better thus, they argued, than that he should be permitted to rush madly and uselessly to his death.

Approaching nearer the camp-fire, the *vaquero* and the little negro had a full view of the fearful tableau there displayed. How great was their relief, when they saw that their friends were not the tortured ones! They could hardly repress their yells of delight.

Yet, they were well aware, that neither they nor those whom they sought were "out of the woods" by a great deal.

The faithful Mexican and the black youth lost no time, however. Both sunk to the earth and crawled forward to reconnoiter the camp, and form plans as to the manner of action.

Soon they were again peering through the foliage at the fiendish dance of the six Comanches before and below the tortured ones. They then saw, for the first time, that the camp was comparatively deserted. It was plain, that the



war-party, with the exception of the guards, had been attracted by the firing of the bandits at the ranch, and had hastened in that direction.

Then the glances of the pair fell upon the bound forms of Big Foot Wallace and little Leon, on the west side of the open.

At once, Humpy decided as to the proper manner of action, and also that they must go about it forthwith. He held a brief and whispered consultation with Francisco, explaining his plan. They would be obliged to act upon it before the dance ended, or their mission might prove fruitless; and only death be the consequence to themselves and the captives.

What the boy proposed was, to make a circuit amid the undergrowth to the west side of the camp, crawl cautiously to the captives, and cut them free; then, with revolver ready, he would give a silent signal to Francisco, who would open fire upon the Indians from his covert, while Humpy shot down those who rushed toward him and the captives.

This seemed not only the best scheme that could be put in operation, but it appeared easy of performance; and Francisco urged the negro boy to hasten in carrying out his portion of the game.

The dwarf stole quickly and silently on his mission.

The Indians still kept up their spasmodic hop and bound, whirling at times with brandished weapons, in mock battle.

Big Foot and Leon had long lain silent; the latter having no hope whatever, and thinking only of his poor uncle at the ranch, with none to stand by him in the defense of his home except, possibly, the faithful Francisco.

The old scout was in no enviable frame of mind, as may be supposed; for he well knew that his life and that of the youth hung by a frail hair—that the savages, upon returning from Bend Ranch, would torture them both!

Thus situated, and entertaining such thoughts, the reader can but faintly imagine the emotions of the two captives, when they beheld the deformed body of Humpy crouching over them, and felt their bonds part beneath his keen knife. But there was no time for words, and the negro boy at once sprung erect, giving a quick and peculiar gesture.

The liberated scout and youth sprung to a sitting posture, shooting glances at the dancing Indians, and then at the uncouth figure before them. The little darky was actually hideous in his fury, as he leveled his revolver.

He gave the signal agreed upon.

The next moment, the spiteful crack of the herder's revolver sounded on the air, followed by a wild death-yell from one of the red-men.

Another, and another shot, indeed a fusillade, followed; as the savages rushed in fright and terror, from the edge of the timber toward the middle of the camp. The firing came from two points—from Humpy and Francisco—until the last of the Comanche guard fell writhing in death.

Then, with a wild whoop, Big Foot Wallace sprung to his feet, and seized the hand of his dusky deliverer, as he yelled:

"Rah! 'Rah! 'Rah! 'Rah fer Humpy, ther whitest little nig in Texas!"

Then, as Francisco stepped forward:

"Rah fer ther whitest Mex' in 'Meriker! Whooper-de-whoop! What did I tell yer, Leon? Didn't I bid yer keep a stiff upper lip, an' tell yer hit would be a long time afore mornin'?"

Little Leon could not speak his gratitude. As before, he had but one thought.

"My uncle—do not tell me that they have slain him!"

"Senor Lemuello is near, and well, but for his great anxiety," replied the *vaquero*. Then, pointing to the two Mexicans, now dead, he continued:

"Senor Lem was with us, he saw these, thought they were his friend and his nephew, and he fainted."

Then all the circumstances connected with the raid upon the ranch by the Greasers, the abandonment of the same, and the search for the captives, was told the scout and Leon, in as few words as possible. This done, they hastened to the side of Captain La Grange, the little darky going ahead, and unbinding his master, who was still unconscious.

Water was procured, and the old ranchero was soon partially revived. He was dazed and bewildered, his brain having been so shocked that it was some time before he fully realized that he saw before him the two whom he had never again expected to meet in this life.

His joy knew no bounds.

He cared not if the ranch was destroyed, and

his horses and cattle stolen, as long as his idolized boy was spared and restored to him.

But there was little time to indulge in sentiment, explanation, or talk of any kind, except that which bore on the business in hand; for our friends determined to destroy all the property of the red-skins, and they knew that the war-party was liable to return at any time.

Saddles, blankets, and provisions were piled in a heap, and the same set on fire; and the mustangs that had been left in the camp, except such as they required, were cut loose and stampeded.

Big Foot was bent upon gathering his "crop of hair." In other words, he scalped the slain Indians.

All was now ready for departure.

The old scout was so fortunate as to find his revolvers and belt, concealed in a roll of blankets, and Leon's as well; consequently, the little party was increased to five. They then sped from the camp, crossed the river, passed on to the south plain, and galloped along the border of the timber toward the entrance of the big bend—perhaps, also, toward the same death, which they had several times evaded only by a "scratch."

#### CHAPTER XIV.

##### MISFORTUNES COME NOT SINGLY.

AFTER the escape of Big Foot Wallace, with the unconscious form of little Leon in his arms, the gang of Greasers broke out in ejaculations of vexation and profanity.

"Carajo!"

"Santa Maria!"

"El diablo, Big Foot Wallace!"

Such were the outcries on all sides.

Two of their number lay mortally wounded. They had lost nine in the conflict with the Comanches, and but nine now remained; their leader, who might also be dead, making but half a score in all. The bandits were infuriated, and also greatly terrified and demoralized; for they had reason to believe that the Indians were on their trail.

Consequently, Bluff Bill was at once thrown across the saddle in front of one of his men, and the remnant of the band dashed away, leaving their two dying comrades.

There being no one competent to command, should they be attacked, their anxiety was very great; but Bluff Bill was a hard man to kill, and soon after they had started, his curses were heard, not loud but deep. A halt was then made, and he was assisted to a natural position. After taking a long swallow from a flask of *mescal* which was handed him, he glanced around upon his swarthy followers, and asked:

"Where is that boy, and the man who struck me?"

"The man was Big Foot Wallace, Capitan Bill, and he took the young senior away," answered one of the band.

"Why didn't you shoot the cuss?"

"We all fired," returned the same bandit, "but he escaped. He is one *diablo*. He shot Pedro and Pinales. Both are dying, or dead."

"Then we are but ten?"

"We are twelve, Capitan Bill!" was shouted from the dark shades; and out burst Pablo and Garcia, the two spies from Bend Ranch.

"Viva!" burst from the band, in chorus.

"Good boys!" said Bluff Bill. "You come in the nick of time. What news from the bend?"

The two traitors had only to report the arrival at the ranch, as they supposed, of the old scout, but alone. This relieved greatly the outlaws, for they had feared he had a force with him.

"There are none except Senor Lem and Francisco at the ranch," asserted Pablo; "and we can kill them, and drive away the horses, before the Comanches discover the 'sign' that will betray the locate of the *casa* and corrals, which will not be before morning."

"You're right," replied their leader; "but we don't want to kill Captain Lem. He is Cortina's meat, and besides I don't fancy dispatching my own brother. Curses on that Big Foot Wallace! Had it not been for him, we would have the youngster, and then we would have had the game in our own hands. But I'll not go back until I've accomplished my object."

"Vamonos! We'll drive all the stock away. If you have lost your comrades, at least it doubles your winnings."

"Where's the black devil?" inquired Pablo.

"I split his head when I captured Leon," replied Bluff Bill.

"But are you sure he's dead, capitan? His skull is hard to split."

"Don't fret about him; I laid him out cold. The Comanches will have to nose around until morning, and by that time we shall have got in our work. Loads of doubloons for all who recross the Grande with Bluff Bill; but, remember we go not without Captain Lem and Leon. Vamonos!"

"Viva el capitan! Viva Cortina! Viva Mexico!"

The outlaws drove spurs, dashed out free from the timber, and sped down-stream toward the big bend, anticipating an easy victory in everything except the recapture of Leon, which appeared as yet difficult.

However, Bluff Bill reasoned that, owing to the presence of the Indians, Big Foot would proceed with the youth to the bend, and then fall easily and naturally into their hands; for he intended to capture the ranch, and station a spy to watch the west plain for the approach of the giant scout.

Pablo and Garcia rode, one on each side of Captain Bill, communicating to him all that they knew of the state of affairs at Bend Ranch. But for the arrival of Big Foot, the spies explained that they would have driven the herds up the river and out upon the plain, under cover of the darkness. Bluff Bill cursed the Indians and the old scout, but swore he would not be balked by either of them.

On the swarthy horde galloped, turning into and up the bend toward the ranch, their horses covered with foam and panting laboriously. This worried the Mexicans, for they saw that, should they be pursued by the Comanches, they could not escape by flight. Their captain banished their fears, however, by promising them fresh mounts within the hour; as they could choose animals from the corrals that would bear them with ease to Mexico beyond the possibility of being overtaken.

Soon they reached the timber, and stealing silently through the same, beheld the corrals filled with hardy horses and mules in good trim. Here, secure from view, the bandits dismounted, and reconnoitered the ranch.

The next moment Bluff Bill uttered an oath of fury, for his eye had lighted upon Humpy, the negro boy, whom he believed slain by his own hand. The little darky was crawling toward the dwelling which, as he had expected, was tightly closed. Knowing how superstitious his followers were, Bill did not report to them the presence of the deformed youth. However, they saw him as he sprung into the door of the dwelling.

The order was given to fire, but it came too late to kill Humpy.

The reader already knows how Captain Lem and Francisco, retreating by the rear exit, reached the woods in safety, accompanied by the dwarf. But before the dwelling was deserted one of the perfidious spies was struck by a bullet and another outlaw had an arm broken from the fusillade fired by Francisco before the escape was effected.

The bandits remained behind the trees for some time, greatly infuriated at the fix in which they found themselves, for they feared to expose themselves after losing so many of their number. Bluff Bill was on nettles, for he dared not risk his men either in an advance or a retreat. His cowardly nature caused him to tremble at the slightest sound.

The silence, so deep and impressive, filled the superstitious Mexicans with dread and forebodings, and their leader felt that some move must be made, or all would be lost. He dispatched one of the band across the river, to watch the plain, and report if any one approached from up the river. Then he got the outlaws together by a signal, and ordered fresh horses to be lassoed from the corrals, and equipped. This move gave, as he intended, the Greasers more confidence.

After this a volley was fired at the cabin, and a demand made upon the occupants to surrender, but silence reigned.

This maddened the miscreant yet more, and he gave orders that some of his men should break in the door, the others shooting through the loop-holes at the same time. It was no easy matter to get the bandits to obey this order, but they at length agreed.

An improvised battering-ram was brought to bear upon the door, at the same moment that a volley of bullets struck the log walls.

Not a sound came from within.

Not a human being was to be seen.

The Mexicans were now more alarmed than ever. They thought it strange that no shot had been fired from the dwelling since the first rapid volley when they arrived. Bluff Bill began to suspect that possibly his intended victims had



escaped. Then the rear door was discovered, which strengthened this suspicion.

Bill was by this time almost beside himself with fury. He hesitated, however, at hinting to his followers what he considered the true state of affairs. They would swear by all the saints in the calendar, that the *diablo* black boy had, leagued with Satan, spirited Captain Lem and Francisco away.

And, did Humpy possess this power, he could defeat their every aim and object!

This would discourage them, and lead to revolt and desertion.

But Bluff Bill was not to be left in a quandary as to his future movements for any great length of time. While he was deliberating, out shot through the arches of the bottom-timber the terrific shriek of a panther, and so near to the corrals that the startled animals rushed away from the direction of the sound, and crowding with great force against the fence, it gave way!

The horses and mules bounded, with snorts of fright, toward their grazing-grounds. Not only this, but the mad stampede carried with it the equipped steeds of the outlaws. Not a horse or mule remained.

Bluff Bill and his bandit followers were left dismounted.

They could not have been more terribly astounded and enraged.

Death stared them in the face!

Should the Comanches now dash down on them they would be hunted and slain like dogs.

Their sheet-anchors were gone!

But this paralyzing misfortune came not alone, as is usually the case, whether with the good or the bad.

The sentinel posted to watch the west plains had dozed in his great fatigue, and upon recovering himself, beheld the Comanche war-party coming quite near at terrific speed, and headed toward the ranch. The savages could not see him, and he sped in terror to the river, plunged in, and swam across.

And just as the thunder of the stampede was dying away in the distance, while the frantic and dumfounded bandits were gazing one at another in consternation, out from the dense shades burst their comrade who had been on guard.

As he sped forward with ghastly terror imprinted upon his face and in his widely-starting eyes, he yelled:

"Los Comanches! El diablo Comanches!"

#### CHAPTER XV.

##### A COWARD TO THE LAST.

No outcry of alarm could have appalled the Mexican outlaws more than that of the sentinel. It was little wonder that Bluff Bill was at last forced to decide that luck had turned dead against him—that he had lost the game!

Clutching the terror-stricken guard, he yelled: "Why, in the fiend's name, are you frightened? Speak, man, or I'll strangle you!"

"Santa Maria! They are at the timber! They will ford the river in a few minutes!"

"They—the Comanches? Then you have slept at your post?" hissed Bill.

The sentinel saw murder in the eyes of his leader. Tearing free from him, he sprang madly away into the shades. Reaching the river, he plunged in just as the leading Comanches struck the opposite side. He saw not the red braves until too late. The fingers of a painted warrior clutched him by the hair, and drew him partly from the water.

For an instant the flashing steel glittered in the hand of the Indian, and then descended into the breast of the bandit, his blood tinged the dark waters of the Rio Leona, while the next his scalp hung at the belt of his slayer.

Bluff Bill sought not to follow the sentinel. Indeed, he had enough, and more than enough on his hands, to preserve his own life. He cast one sweeping glance around upon his swarthy followers.

None knew where to turn, or what to do.

The miscreant well knew that his life would not be long safe with that remnant of his band. There was but one way for him to escape with life, and even by that little hope. He would attempt it, however, and at once.

A moment's delay would be fatal.

"Run, men! Run to the casa!" he called out. "To linger is to be lost!"

The coward pointed toward the cabin, but made little effort to gain the building himself.

The terrified Greasers rushed into the house in a mass. As the last man plunged into the dark abode, Bluff Bill darted around the corner of the house, and speedily gained the timber.

Once inside, the bandits closed and barred the doors, without discovering that their leader was not among them, all being in Egyptian dark-

ness within. Had they sprung to the loop-holes at the rear of the dwelling, they would have distinguished the dastard's form, fleeing to cover, he having deserted them—sacrificed all, as he believed or judged, to save his own vile and cowardly life!

Hardly had the panting and excited outlaws fastened the heavy oaken doors, when, out from the dark thickets shot two-score or more of paint-daubed warriors, in all their savage war-gear, out into the bright moonlight of the open, opposite the cabin.

Then, in solid ranks, they halted, and sat their steeds in silence.

Guttural grunts, expressing their disappointment, were presently heard.

The corrals were empty!

At a gesture from a plumed chief, a flight of arrows was sent, the steel points becoming imbedded in the logs and doors.

Had the Mexicans been prudent, they would have allowed the Indians to believe the dwelling to be unoccupied; but, foolishly, they fired a volley at once.

Two braves were killed and several wounded, which maddened the red-skins and incited them to revenge. They were satisfied that they had "corraled" the band of Mexicans with whom they had been in conflict up the river. They knew that the guns which had been fired were not American rifles or held in American hands. Had they been so, the explosions, short and sharp, would have proved it, and there would have been as many warriors slain or wounded as there had been guns fired.

Immediately after the volley a chorus of the most vengeful war-cries filled the air, the Indians bearing away their dead and wounded out of range. Then a consultation, or "council talk," was held between those of high rank in war. This resulted in a half-score of braves being ordered on the trail of the stampeded horses, for the savages concluded that the Mexicans had not stampeded their own animals, but must have been outwitted by the ranchero and his servants.

To obtain the equipments of the bandits' horses, quite as much as the steeds themselves, was the intention of the red-men. They knew that they held their foes in the log-cabin at their mercy.

After the departure of the trailers, immediate steps were taken to destroy the Greasers, who were now like rats in a trap.

A stack of dry moss lay convenient to the corrals. This, at the command of the chief, was brought in quantities to the dwelling by several of the braves. But they feared to approach nearer. Therefore they climbed up the trees by the corrals, and thence passed into others, and so on toward the cabin, until directly over it. They had been careful to accomplish this at points where they could not be seen by the bandits from the loop-holes.

The Greasers were not aware of the danger that threatened them.

They were not ignorant, however, of the fact that their painted foes were planning some trick which would prove disastrous to them.

Soon after closing and barring the door they had discovered that their captain, Bluff Bill, was not with them. They were infuriated at this cowardly desertion, for they well knew by that time that he had ordered them into the cabin expressly to give himself a better opportunity to escape.

It was now too late to think of what they might have done.

They were evidently doomed; for, after the volley had been fired into the Indians—which they now regretted—they knew that the savages would not be satisfied until they had all been slain. There seemed but one possible avenue of escape.

That was, to hurl open the door, and rush to the shades; there scattering, and fighting their way. Even thus, at best, few could hope to escape.

The last thing they did, was to swear vengeance against Bluff Bill, should he ever be in their power.

It needed no orders from any one, for them to keep a keen watch from the loop-holes. A horrible fascination chained their gaze. The two, who had been wounded by the bullets of Francisco, repressed their groans and complaints; their dread horror of the fate in store for them crushing out the pain which would, otherwise, have been almost insupportable.

With bated breath, the Mexicans gazed out upon the hellish scene—upon that savage array flitting from shade to moonlight—horrible, beyond expression, to that imprisoned band, in that rude log cabin.

Did they think, then, of their own dastard deeds, of their crime-stained hands, and consider that it was but a just retribution, which had overtaken them in their criminal career? If so, their thoughts were doomed to sudden change; and a change of scene was soon to be brought about in the startling and tragic drama.

Some soft substance seemed to them to be falling upon the cedar-shingled roof. Again and again they heard the same sound.

Then came a brightening up of the shades, yet no fire was to be seen.

As this was noticed, the watchers at one side rushed to the other, and from end to end.

Then the miserable wretches burst into one wild, simultaneously uttered yell of hopeless despair, as a single word fell from the lips of Pablo, the wounded spy.

"Fire!"

In a mad frenzy, all gazed upward.

The bundles of dry moss, ignited, and dropped from the limbs upon the roof, had by that time burst into a roaring blaze; kindling the dry and tinder-like shingles, and shining through every crack and crevice.

The wretched Greasers gazed despairingly into each other's ghastly and horror-drawn faces.

"Comanches infernos!"

Thus they cried out, in hoarse whispers, that sounded weird and awesome amid the crackling of the flames.

The intense heat could not long be borne.

Who would lead the dash to death outside?

Peering out, they saw that the Indians had drawn nearer, with couched lances and ready bows.

Nearly all the war-party were in front of the cabin. This proved that they had no knowledge of the rear door.

There was no hesitation now.

Hope had returned.

There was a rush to the rear exit; the door flew open, and out the bandits fled, shooting down the few savages that opposed them!

War-whoops rent the air.

Like an avalanche the Comanches charged after the fugitives; while from within that burning cabin the shrieks of the deserted wounded ones shot forth, until the roof falling in upon them hushed their cries forever!

Did those who had left their helpless comrades to that hell of flames deserve to have escaped the same doom?

Even their savage foes would have risked life to save wounded fellow-braves from an enemy.

#### CHAPTER XVI.

##### WATCHING AND WAITING.

A MOST thankful party was that which had passed through so many dangers, and were now galloping, for aught they knew, into others as deadly.

We allude to Big Foot Wallace, Captain La Grange, Leon, Francisco and Humpy.

Of course the captain's belief was that the raid of the Mexicans had been organized by Cortina, who was in this way carrying out his long-deferred scheme of vengeance. But when he ascertained that it was his own brother who led the Greasers, he began to think that possibly the latter alone was responsible for it.

Big Foot, however, maintained that the pair were pards in the enterprise; that, had Bill wished to slay Captain Lem and Leon, he could have disposed of the boy when he had him in his power. He contended that the villain's intent had been to carry his brother and nephew captives to Cortina's camp in Mexico, and then return to Texas and claim the ranch and fortune. This could not be accomplished unless the real owners were slain, and this part of the fiendish work was to have been left to Juan Cortina to perform.

But Bluff Bill, to accomplish his ends, must have made the capture without being recognized when in Texas as William La Grange, as, in that case, his life would be greatly endangered from his having been affiliated with Cortina's men. Hence he had disguised himself. But this had not availed, for the old scout had seen through it, and even Leon had been satisfied he was not a Mexican.

Thus far the guilty had met with much of retribution, and perhaps the end was not yet.

Still, anxious though they were, our friends could not help laughing heartily when they thought of the bandits besieging the cabin, and not a soul within it.

Their laughter increased when Big Foot pictured, in his own peculiar phraseology, the fury and astonishment of Bluff Bill, when he should eventually discover that his brother had escaped.



—that he must return to Mexico without the two captives he had sworn to deliver to Cortina.

Then all thought of the consternation, the terror and carnage that must follow the dash of the Comanches upon the Mexican marauders, who might be annihilated to a man.

But Captain Lem, Leon, and Humpy were now weary and exhausted from all that they had undergone! The scout saw this, and vowed they should go no further than the entrance of the bend; that there they must halt, remaining concealed in the undergrowth until he and Francisco had scouted up the bend, to ascertain what was going on at the ranch.

Indeed they all knew that, even were they fresh and strong, they could not think of battling against the war-party. They believed that the ranch was doomed, and that the horses and mules were also lost. They were lucky, even to have escaped with their lives. As for the Greasers and their leader, they no longer looked upon them as in the least formidable.

When the entrance to the bend was reached, all kept close to the timber, in the shade of the same; slowly walking their horses around the curve, until they could command a view up the grazing-grounds of the bend. But, nothing met their gaze, of an animate nature; and, selecting a favorable spot, Big Foot bade the three who were so much fatigued stake their horses in an "open" near the margin of the timber, and then lie down and rest.

They were not backward in following this advice.

Then the old scout and Francisco started on their perilous mission, with the promise soon to rejoin their friends.

Captain La Grange and his nephew were soon asleep, and the little negro pretended to follow suit; but his keen eyes were watchful, and repose was far from his object.

Big Foot and Francisco rode rapidly, along the border of the timber for fully two miles, when suddenly they jerked their animals to haunches, with ejaculations of surprise; and that, notwithstanding they had anticipated the scene which met their view.

Far up the bend toward the ranch was a great dark mass, which the bright moon brought out boldly against the level plain. This dark mass was in motion. It appeared to move but slowly, but the observers knew it was approaching them at a terrific rate of speed.

Well they knew what it was!

Horses and mules were there, in a wild, ungovernable stampede!

"Dog-gone my ole heart ef ther yaller-bellies hain't made a clean job of hit, an' started all ther critters jist a-hummin'! Frisco, I doesn't reckon we-uns kin wipe out ther hull o' Bluff Bill's hellyuns, but s'posin' we thin 'em out a leetle! What d'yer say?"

"Francisco is ready."

"Good boyee! But I'm jist tee-totally bamboozled ef I kin see a single human ahindt ther herd!"

"There are no men, Senor Wallace. The horses and mules were stampeded from the corrals, but not followed."

"I reckon ther reds run in on ther yallers an' broke up ther nag-stealin' game, givin' Bluff Bill as much as he c'd 'tend ter. Jee-hosiphah! but thet's a purty snug batch o' critters ter run inter ole Mex'et onc't. Dang my ole heart, ef thar ain't some o' ther nags saddled an' bridled!"

"What ther dickens does thet mean?"

The vast stampede of several hundred animals that, with flying manes and high-tossing heads, swept toward the entrance of the bend, were quite near to the station of our two friends, and the equipped animals could be plainly distinguished. Of course, the presence of these in that immense herd was a great puzzle to Big Foot and Francisco, and they spurred further out upon the plain to inspect them as they sped past.

The practiced eyes of the *vaquero* at once detected that the equipped beasts belonged to Captain Lem, but the saddles and bridles were those of the Mexican outlaws without doubt; for all that belonged to the ranch were in use.

"Cat-fish an' catamounts!" exclaimed the old scout.

Then he laughed until he was in danger of strangulation.

Francisco eyed him in wonder.

"I've gut ter ther bottom o' ther biz, I reckon, Frisco!" he explained. "Ther Cortina cusses jist broke tha'r nags all up by ther time they struck ther ranch; an' bein' sorter skeery 'bout ther reds runnin' in on 'em, they changed harness onter fresh stock, hevin' it ready fer ter git up an' git on."

"But ther kerral'd critters gut let loose an' skeered by ther red skulkers, an' stompeded, takin' ther saddle nags with 'em."

"Dang ef hit ain't jist too good a joke on Bluff Bill, ef my 'six' did go back on me when I sot out ter crack his skull! They're left without a critter ter jump, an' ther big batch o' reds air 'bout ter glide in on 'em, an' eager ter harvest h'ar. I'm bettin' high they're wishin' they'd struck t'other side ther Grandee."

"But le's sorter try an' turn ther stompede down river, which'll save 'em. Ther hull batch'll be purty slimpsy in ther legs, by the time we glides out ther bend."

"Too late, Senor Big Foot. Look! Comanches! Ride fast to timber, or we shall be seen!"

"Dog'd, but we must glide ter kiver! Come on, let ther nags go. We-uns must work on ther sly from this out."

Soon our two friends were in the dark shades, from which they peered out up the bend.

A moment's scrutiny, after gaining cover, convinced them that the approaching body of horsemen were indeed Indians.

"Ef they turns ther stompede," said the giant scout, they'll hev ter drive back ter ther pards; an' we-uns kin tend ter 'em arter we've sorter nosed 'round ther ranch, an' see'd what sort of a hurrah's nest thar bee's thar."

"Howsomdever, I opine we'd better keep cluss ter timber, in ther shade, an' ready ter glide inter kiver; fer thar ain't no tellin' what mought turn up. Redsan' Greasers 'pear ter be es thick es June-bugs on a muggy night, er ticks onter a chap'rell mule's neck."

Up the border of the timber the two men galloped, shaded by the branches, until within less than a mile from the ranch, when again they made halt quickly.

"Jee-rusalem!" muttered the scout, in a rage, "ther dang'd or'nary kiotes'll bu'st up our hull biz. They've sot ther ranch afire!"

"Dang ef I doesn't spill some o' thar bleed, an' t'ar ha'r fer that job, er I'm a liar by ther sun!"

"Santa Maria!" exclaimed Francisco.

They had, by this time, reached a point sufficiently near the swell of the bend to enable them to see the glare of the flames, as the Indians fired the roof.

Both drove deep their spurs and rode onward, but soon turned into the timber, to avoid being discovered.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### SWIFT RETRIBUTION.

BLUFF BILL, upon realizing that he had effected his escape without having been detected, halted to rest and recover breath. But, as from his covert he beheld the horde of Indians dart out from the opposite side of the "open," he trembled with fright and horror, and resolved to skirt around the corrals and seek concealment in a safer place.

He did so at once, proceeding deeper into the wood, and then, by a wide *detour*, to the bottom-timber east of the point at which the Comanches had emerged from the same. But, when he saw the detachment proceed toward the entrance to the bend, he believed they had gone in search of the ranchero. He then became insanely eager to effect his object, and carry his brother and nephew to Mexico, even though he must act without assistance.

This seemed impossible, yet something might turn up. Rendered almost desperate by the disappointments and disasters he had experienced, Bluff Bill tore through the thickets at his utmost speed, striving to keep the squad of Comanches, who were on the trail of the stampede, in view. Finding this impossible, he ran some little risk by taking to the outer margin of the timber, where his way was clear and the limbs shaded him. Being in the rear of the war-party he felt secure.

The miscreant ran like a madman.

He had lost his *scmbrero*, his false hair and beard, his clothing and flesh were torn, and his head much bruised and swollen where he had been struck by the giant scout.

A most forlorn-looking object he was, having more the appearance of a hunted beast than a man.

On sped Bluff Bill, but suddenly halted, and then shot into the undergrowth in abject terror, for, but a short distance away, he saw approaching him Big Foot and Francisco. They passed on, however, and he knew that he had escaped detection. He caught, too, a few words spoken by the scout to his companion.

These betrayed the fact that Captain Lem and Leon were together, and resting at the entrance of the bend.

The wretch bounded forward gleefully. On

he went, until he feared his strength would give out; but at length he saw the far-stretching plain and the red-men striving to control the immense herd and swerve them around on the back trail. Soon he reached the curve of the timber. Here the miscreant used great caution, for he was ignorant of the position of his intended victims.

But here again was Bluff Bill favored.

He saw Humpy the negro lad, crawling toward the border of the timber, doubtless alarmed by the sound of the stampede.

He suspected that the deformed lad had but just left the captain and Leon, and he marked the direction in his mind's eye that he had come; then stealing that way, feeling positive that Humpy would be absent for some time, watching the Indians and the stampede.

Ten minutes later, Bill peered into a little "open," where, fast asleep, lay the two who stood between him and wealth.

They were both at his mercy!

He dared not murder them, yet he resolved they should be his captives. Stealthily he crawled forward, and, securing a lariat, bound the ankles of both sleepers. Then he gently drew their wrists together, and secured them also. Both still slept soundly.

The next move of Bluff Bill was to gag his prisoners, and this he succeeded in doing effectually; which done, he caught up little Leon, and rushed toward the river, hiding the youth in a gully. Returning, he forced Captain Leon to walk before him to the same spot. Having thus gotten the two together, he dragged Leon along a path, cut the cord that was around the boy's ankles, and led him away, bidding the old ranchero follow him, or he would send a bullet through his heart.

Who can imagine the emotions of the uncle and nephew, after all they had already gone through, to be thus at the mercy of a heartless villain, who, though related to them by ties of blood, was associated with Mexican assassins and thieves?

Where was Humpy?

Both asked this question mentally.

They feared that the faithful negro boy had been slain. If so, had this unparalleled wretch murdered him?

This seemed probable.

And what was to be their own fate?

Would they again be rescued?

Could they be traced?

And where were the Mexican confederates of their captor?

Such were the questions that crowded in upon their minds.

Ere long, Bluff Bill halted, and secured Leon to a small tree, near the bank of the river. He then clutched Captain La Grange, and bound him to the opposite side of the same tree.

"Don't try to escape," he growled, "for you will be watched! You have had your own say long enough, brother mine. I swore to bring you down to dots, and now I've got you. Never again will you see your ranch. To Mexico you go, and if you'll be good, Leon shall keep you company; but, try any tricks, and I'll part you dead sure!"

"So long. I'll see you later."

With these words, Bill La Grange strode away, leaving his two captives gagged and bound fast in a standing position.

Had their kind fates deserted them?

It seemed so.

Bluff Bill hastened back by another route to the entrance of the bend. He resolved, if possible, to catch three of the equipped horses.

Should he succeed, he would take his captives to Mexico; if not, he had no settled plan of action.

He had, for the time being, forgotten the presence, or rather the absence, of Humpy.

The black dwarf, however, was crouched in the thicket not far from him, and watching the Indians in their ineffectual efforts to control the stampede.

And it was in the direction of the little ducky that Bluff Bill now strode, coming to a stop but ten feet from him.

The villain uttered an ejaculation of satisfaction and relief when he saw the horses were scattering. Humpy perceived the hideous, hated miscreant who had once felled him with a cruel blow, intending to murder him, and who had nearly slain his young master; indeed, who had been the prime cause of all the misery, suffering, pain and anguish through which he and those he loved had passed.

The young negro became almost insane in his rage. He was frantically furious.

Drawing his revolver he took aim, without due consideration of the act he was about to



commit. Under the impulse of momentary madness, he pulled the trigger.

A loud report followed.

Bluff Bill fell, as if stricken with death!

Humpy sprung to the prostrate form of his victim, and examined his head, at which he had aimed. He perceived that the wretch was only stunned.

His first emotion was one of thankfulness that he had not slain the brother of his master. But soon another feeling had possession of him.

A wild whoop sounded, and turning his head and gazing through the screen of bushes, Humpy discovered the Comanches riding fast and directly toward him.

They had heard the report and seen the smoke from his pistol.

There was no use in his attempting to remove Bluff Bill. He could not lift one-half his weight.

The negro boy sprung into the shades with a wild and strange expression in his eyes.

It was but fate after all.

Retribution had overtaken Bluff Bill.

The miscreant was doomed!

Once in the power of the Comanches, it was impossible for him to escape them.

Ever thoughtful of the safety of others the dwarf had placed the pistol of the outlaw in the hand of the latter, pointing the muzzle toward the wound.

He wished the savages to think that Bluff Bill had shot himself, so that they might not search for the person who had fired the pistol, and thus discover Captain La Grange and Leon.

Humpy rushed to warn his master, but he reeled in his tracks as he caught sight of the blankets and saddles.

The old ranchero and his nephew were gone. They had vanished, leaving no sign of which way they had been spirited off or the cause of their departure.

The negro boy was completely nonplused, but soon he recalled the presence of Bluff Bill, and decided that he must have had a hand in the abduction. He was greatly distressed, but it was a time for actions, not words. Kneeling down, after having procured a torch, he examined every inch of ground in the "open."

But the light was insufficient.

Humpy could see no sign whatever.

Infuriated, and with an anguish of heart the most torturing, the boy rushed back to gain a view of the plain.

There he saw Bluff Bill, bound fast upon a horse, in the midst of ten Comanches.

He had that much, at least, for which to be grateful. Humpy was rejoiced that the ruffian was beyond all power to further harm those whom he had vowed to find, even though he must search the bottom for miles in doing so. Yet, he was nearly insane from anguish and grief.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### BLUFFING NO LONGER COUNTS.

YES, Bend Ranch was in ruins.

The main portion of the war-party, with which were the chief and the leading braves, danced around the burning cabin in mad and exultant glee.

Both Big Foot and Francisco witnessed this, but the old scout had often gazed on similar and even worse scenes.

For a long time this was kept up, the searchers, who had been dispatched after the fugitive Mexicans, returning one by one, except those who had been shot. Exultant war-whoops shot from the lips of many, as the returning braves circled scalps about their heads the moment they came in view.

But there came an interruption to the dance. A solitary Indian, who was evidently seriously wounded, staggered from the bushes, uttering a low and peculiar outcry. The warriors instantly gathered about him.

He spoke with difficulty, making many signs and gestures, and often pointed toward the camp of the war-party.

"That red hellyun hev come from ther camp," whispered the old scout. "He air tellin' his pards how we-uns hev escaped, an' how ther guards hev bin shot an' sculped."

"Dog-gone it! We-uns must ha' missed him in ther 'citement. They're b'ilin' mad now, but hit won't do 'em a bit of good. Lay low, Frisco, an' we'll see what's ther nex' thing on ther p'ogramme!"

A vengeful yell was heard, when the wounded brave had reported all that had occurred at the camp since the departure of the war-party. It was possible—or they thought—that they who

had done all this might still be at the camp. In that case, they might mutilate and burn the dead!

All was now bustle and confusion. The chief ordered a return up the river, to capture the despoilers of his camp. There was really no further occasion for the war-party to remain at the ranch, now a smoldering heap. Nothing was to be gained, except the herd of horses and mules; and already braves sufficient had been dispatched after these.

Therefore, leaving but two warriors to await the coming of their comrades with the horses, the war-party, with fierce yells, sped down to the river, forded, and hastened on their way to the camp; taking with them the wounded Indian, who had brought the news.

The giant scout and his companion was greatly relieved at the departure of the red-men.

Their first act was to crawl up on the pair that remained, and end their war-trail; scalping them, and then casting the corpses into the river. Hardly had this been accomplished, when they heard the rumble of many hoofs approaching the corrals; and beheld, as they peered through the foliage, the ten Comanches who had been sent after the stampeding herd.

These had, in their midst, a captive, whom Wallace and Francisco did not at first recognize.

The surprise of the savages was great, when they saw that their comrades were gone. One of them hastened to cross the river, and gaze over the west plain.

The captive was, although transformed in appearance, then identified as Bluff Bill; and Big Foot could not but rejoice that the Indians had taken the wretch off the hands of those he had so terribly wronged. He knew that Bill La Grange was doomed—that Captain Lem and little Leon would never more be molested by their cowardly and villainous relative.

Bluff Bill's career was at an end.

Bluffing would not count in the game in which he would now be forced to take a hand. Death was before him, and death by torture.

The brave, who had sped over the river, gave a peculiar whoop, which brought a yell from the others, who fled toward the stream. The watchers knew that the signal meant the war-party were on the west plain.

Away from the sight of our two friends, sped the Comanches with their captive; the latter the picture of despair and horror.

"Dog-gone my ole heart," was the remark of Big Foot, "ef Bill La Grange hesn't gut ter the eend of his rope I'm a kiote! But, how in thunderation did ther reds light on him? Anyhow I'm glad he's bin skuped in."

"Thar's a good show fer we-uns ter save ther stock now, Frisco. Come on! We can't do nothin' hyer. Hit won't be much of a job ter slap up another cabin, an' we-uns orter thank the good Lord fer fotchin' us through all O. K., an' without losin' a ha'r."

Francisco needed no second order to leave the ranch, and seek Captain Lem and the two boys. He and his pard had not gone far when they spied the herd, at a stand-still, on the northern side of the entrance to the bend. Both hurried on to the little "open" in which they had left their friends, and their concern was great when they found only the saddles and blankets.

Captain La Grange, Leon, and Humpy were gone!

Big Foot gave a long and piercing yell, as a signal.

Faintly to his ears came an answer, in the peculiar manner used by the dwarf.

They hastened in the direction of the sound, struggling through the undergrowth.

The little negro had, until the arrival of the scout and Francisco, searched far and wide for the ranchero and his little nephew, but without success. When he heard the signal at length, he well knew from whom it came, and answered it, rejoicing and relieved that at last he would have assistance in seeking for his friends.

While anxiously waiting, after having given the answering signal, Humpy glanced across the gully, on the bank of which he stood, and was struck with the strange appearance of the trunk of one of the trees. It seemed to him on further examination of the same, that two bears must be leaning against a sapling. But it was very difficult to distinguish objects in the shade.

He then heard the approach of the scout, and descended the gully, giving a yell to Big Foot to let him know where he was. Climbing up the opposite bank, the negro boy found himself near the strange object he had previously noticed. He stole cautiously forward, and gave a cry of alarm, which was quickly followed by

one of the most joyous surprise, as he rushed onward.

At the same moment, Big Foot Wallace and Francisco came up.

The three stood before the fast-bound and gagged forms of Captain Lem and Leon, but they could hardly believe their senses.

The captives were struggling fruitlessly.

It seemed strange not to hear them speak. Soon, however, they were cut free, and the gags removed.

"Jumpin' Jehosiphath!" was the exclamation that escaped the old scout, in his great amazement.

All was soon mutually explained.

Big Foot expatiated somewhat on the several strange and marvelous escapes, and recommended an immediate saddling up, and that all hands start at once to drive the herd down the river to the Frio, for the Comanches would, more than likely, put in an appearance again, and steal every animal. All agreed to this suggestion, and preparations were at once made.

Captain Lem was astonished on hearing that his unnatural brother had fallen into the hands of the Indians. He would have been better satisfied to know that Bluff Bill had been slain; for it gave him a shock to think of one, who was after all his brother, being put to the torture.

Yet, it seemed that the Fates had thus decreed; and it was some consolation to feel that they would not again have their lives and liberty in peril, or be forced to undergo the pain and privation that had so lately been theirs, from the same source.

There is but little more to be told.

The herd was driven to a place of safety, a number of rancheros accompanying our friends back to the bend, a few days after.

There were no signs of Indians at the ranch, but the trail of the war-party was discovered at the entrance of the bend, thus showing that they had been in search of the herd and their escaped captives. The camp of the Indians was visited, and there evidence was found of the tragic end that had overtaken Bluff Bill.

Captain La Grange was assisted by his friends in the erection of another cabin, and the stock was driven back to the bend; although Big Foot advised strongly against it, asserting that Captain Lem would, before much time should elapse, find out that Cortina, the "Scourge of the Rio Grand," had not forgotten his oath of vengeance, or the fact that he had lost a score of his followers through seeking it.

But the old ranchero was stubborn, and was much attached to the old "locate;" and the consequences may appear later, of his persisting in remaining at Bend Ranch, when there was every reason to expect a raid upon it, with Cortina in person as leader.

In closing, we will say that Big Foot Wallace was a frequent visitor at the ranch, and that Humpy was voted a hero, and praised by all. The giant scout, however, was almost constantly in active service; Cortina having invaded Texas with the largest force of desperate bandits ever under the command of any one man in the two Americas.

THE END.

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